

100 YEARS OF HOMELESS VETERANS

They were street-dirty, with long stringy hair and grease-stained clothes in the way that men are who live on the streets, drink too much cheap wine, and rarely have the opportunity to bathe.

As a small child, they frightened and repulsed me; I held my mother's hand more tightly whenever I passed one of them resting his legless stumps on a makeshift wooden platform with roller skates nailed underneath, pushing himself along the sidewalk with dirty leather-gloved hands. Mostly they sold the daily newspaper, the *Newport News Tribune*. But, on Armistice Day, they sold the small red paper poppies, a memorial to the millions of soldiers who died in WW1 and were buried in Flanders Field. They cost only a nickel and my mother always bought one and pinned it on her blouse above her breast. The legless grease-stained veterans of that war were there to frighten small children and remind us all about the senseless slaughter, of barbed wire, open trenches, and the corpses strewn across stretches of "no mans land" in what was supposed to be the "war to end all wars."

Unfortunately, the horror of that war waned long ago and our endless wars have continued unabated. Though we no longer see legless war veterans sitting on makeshift skateboards selling red paper poppies, we do see veterans discharged from the VA hospitals in gowns and now given their own wheel chairs instead of constructing their own skateboards.

We have made some progress since my childhood. We no longer have Armistice Day because "the war to end all wars," which slaughtered over 20 million people, did not end all wars. Armistice Day had to be expanded to include those slaughtered in WW2, Korea, Vietnam, the first Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan and countless other minor U.S. "incursions." So now we also have Veterans Day, on which we honor those who served, as well as Memorial Day, when we lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and give thanks for our soldiers'

patriotic service rather than remembering in silence the horror of our "senselessly slaughtered" millions.

The recent and unfolding scandal of the Veterans Administration and the freeing of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl have placed the saga of U.S. ongoing wars over the last half-century, with its emotionally and physically wounded veterans, squarely at the forefront of our collective attention. According to *PBS News Hour*, aired last month, 57,000 vets have been waiting for more than six months for a medical appointment.

As someone who has worked on Los Angeles' Skid Row for over forty years, I am painfully aware of the fact that a significant portion of the people we serve—perhaps up to half of a total population of over 58,000—are homeless or marginally housed veterans.

Los Angeles has the dubious distinction of being second, only to New York City, as the homeless capitol of the U.S. And Los Angeles is by far the capitol of homeless veterans, boasting a population of over 6,000. In the state of California, 68% of all homeless veterans are not only "un-housed," they are "un-sheltered" as well, which means that they live on sidewalks, freeway meridians, city parks, river beds and vacant lots. Many suffer from physical as well as mental issues, largely PTSD, and since L.A. County has located 90% of all services for homeless men on Skid Row, the majority of homeless vets come to live here.

My first sense that things were not going all that well for veterans was about a year ago, when the downtown VA began referring their patients with dental needs and eye care needs to our Catholic Worker clinic. Please keep in mind that the Los Angeles Catholic Worker has a budget of less than \$200,000 a year, while the VA has a total budget of almost 153 billion dollars per year. The salary of two or three social workers who sent their unserved patients to our tiny clinic amounts to the budget for the entire year at the L.A. Catholic Worker. Now, we all want to help veterans, but to send them to our tiny Skid Row clinic when there is a massive VA hospital in Westwood, and a

major clinic a half-mile from our soup kitchen, seems more than ludicrous. One wonders if it is possible for our government not to feel ashamed! While there seems to be plenty of money for war-making industrialists, making billion-dollar Pentagon war toys, those who risked their lives in service to their country cannot even receive adequate dental or eye care, again, sometimes waiting months for an appointment with a doctor. The bottom line is that the budgets of our wars are obviously being balanced on the backs those who fought them.

For somewhat selfish reasons, I look forward to the annual event that the local Veterans Administration call the "Stand Down."

On that day, half of our diners clear out and, rather than serving a thousand meals, we serve only about five hundred. It is practically a day off for Catholic Workers! Our guests rush to the Federal Building so that they can receive the much sought after "hygiene kit," which includes toothpaste, a tooth brush, soap, shampoo, dental floss, and a wash cloth—all of the things most desired, and actually, most needed by homeless street people. While the event is poignantly illustrative of the large numbers of homeless vets on Skid Row, it also shows that our government, while it is aware of the desperate plight of homeless vets, at the same time chooses to meet their needs in the most pusillanimous and pitiful manner.

Many scholars of urban history date the advent of "blighted skid row" populations in then U.S. to the end of the Civil War. Returning veterans from that war, as with many subsequent wars, were traumatized, uprooted, and unable to reconnect with former family and friends so they "rode the rails," hitching free rides on newly emerging continental railroad system, searching rootlessly for seasonal work and camaraderie in the "hoboemia" of other veterans, fugitives, and a colorful assortment of alienated individuals. Traditional skid rows, with their rescue missions, seedy bars, flophouses, and red light districts, developed as a kind of urban respite for these disaffected travelers. While much has changed since the mid 19th century, the alienation and desperation of war veterans has remained a constant.

Where I live in Los Angeles is somewhat unusual in that it, unlike other cities, never dispersed its skid row population. The City still maintains a very condensed, though somewhat polluted, area for homeless and marginal people; a last refuge for desperate, dispossessed, marginal people. And our own Catholic Worker soup kitchen and dining garden has naturally become a gathering place for a significant percent of the City's homeless veterans population.

Following are interviews that I conducted in June 2014, with homeless and marginally housed veterans, some who live in tents on the streets around our Catholic Worker soup kitchen, where many of them dine.

JOE THOMAS

Joe Thomas is a medium height, African American, man with pleasing features except for the long scar across the entire length of his face, a scar from a bullet that left his left cheek a mass of bloody meat hanging from his jaw.

"I was brought up in a convent by the Sisters of Loretto, in Racine Wisconsin," he told me. "The sisters found me in a field and brought me to the convent. I went to Catholic schools all of my life, even attended seminary briefly, but it wasn't for me."

"I was staying with some friends in the city one night in 1967 when the Metro Police raided our apartment looking for draft dodgers. Next day, we appeared before a judge. He offered us a deal: 'You can do five years in Leavenworth or you can "volunteer" for the military.' Well, we all 'volunteered.' Even though I was not legally a draft dodger because there was no record of my birth. However, we all 'volunteered' rather than go to Leavenworth. I 'volunteered' for the Marines. It happened that way for lots of black people and people of color in the Vietnam War years."

"They needed troops so much that they sent us off to Nam even before we had completed our training. We flew the 19-hour flight in a military transport plane. The pilot and crew were too scared to land so we had to parachute into Da Nang airport."

“Even though the military put a ‘Revlon Face’ on it, segregation and racial prejudice were as bad for people of color in the 60’s as they were in the 30’s and 40’s. We got the ‘bulk-end’ of everything. They would pack the front lines with black people and other people of color. We would handle the most toxic chemicals and jet fuels. Sometimes they would give an on the spot ‘field promotion’ of Sargent to a person of color and tell him to command the platoon and capture the hill they themselves were to afraid to take.”

“I served in Nam from 1967 to 1972. I never went back to the States during that time. I served twice the time most every one else did because I stood up to an incompetent ‘brass Lieutenant.’ He wanted us to stand at attention and salute him all the time. But if you’re in a combat zone, that’s how the VC knew who the officers were and who to kill. He also would get our people killed with his incompetent orders. So I stood up to him and got threatened with jail time and got a ‘deal’: no problem ‘just re-up’ for another tour.”

When he was discharged in 1973, Joe worked at various hospital jobs in the Midwest. However, in 1985, he began to develop a number of undiagnosed health problems. When he went to the VA hospital in Westwood, California, he was “put on the agent orange” list.

“That’s what I am pissed off about. They never gave me a physical when I was discharged, and now they tell me that I have bone marrow degeneration and prostate cancer.”

Not too long ago, Joe stopped chemotherapy “because it wasn’t doing me any good.” Now the VA is giving him oxycontin: “Because they want to make me as comfortable as possible.”

The day after talking to Joe I encountered him eating lunch in our garden. He was wearing a t-shirt, emblazoned with the Marine Corps logo, an eagle boldly perched on an anchor and surrounded by their motto *Semper Fi* (always faithful). He also wore a brand new cap with the same logo and the words “Once a Marine...” I read the words back to Joe: “Once a Marine...” then he finished the statement for me: “always a Marine.” Even though many Vets may hate the things that

they were forced to do as young men, the intensity of that experience remains the center point of many their lives. And while they may have distain for the institutions, they revere those who share the common bond of their experience. They are indeed a “Band of Brothers,” wounded and broken, but a “Band of Brothers” nonetheless.

JOE TROTTER

Joe was in the army from 1967 to 1969. As an MP, he never went to Vietnam.

“I was what they called a ‘chaser,’ I chased after AWOLS and deserters and I drove them from jails to prisons. However, the worst part of the job was all the dead bodies. They would fly all the body bags in from Okinawa and I would have to pick them up at the air field and drive them back to the base.”

Today, Joe lives on the streets; he has alcohol problems as well as various other health issues, and he is almost blind. He has trouble walking and uses a wheel chair in which he places his meager personal possessions.

Joe has been waiting for three years for his small veteran pension. But the VA “lost his files.” I fear that he may be waiting for a good deal longer and, if his health gets any worse, neither Joe nor the VA will have to worry about his pension.

“CORKEY”

Corkey joined the Army in 1974 thinking that, as the war was winding down, he would never be sent to Vietnam. But he was wrong. As a helicopter mechanic, he thought he would never be called upon to serve in a combat zone. But he was wrong again. Sometimes they would fly him in and drop him in the jungle to repair a downed helicopter. Throughout his tour, he saw men getting shot, helicopters getting blown up, and was shot at himself numerous times “in the line of duty”. He says he always carried his M1 with him.

In 1975, Corkey was at the US Embassy when the VC and the North Vietnamese Liberation Army overwhelmed the capital city of Saigon, signaling the final unraveling of the failed US plan “to stop

communism and bring democracy” to Vietnam. He assisted the panic-stricken embassy personnel and Vietnamese refugees fortunate enough to gain entry into the Embassy grounds as liberation forces surrounded the beleaguered compound. He repaired damaged helicopters and helped passengers board for the short flight to the awaiting American aircraft carriers. “I thought I should have brought my M1 with me that day instead of a monkey wrench.”

“No I didn't get on the last helicopter”, he said when I asked him how he got out. “I flew out on a military transport plane the next day.”

When Corkey was discharged he went back to his parents' home in Torrance, California. He couldn't really talk to anybody about what he had seen and done. He couldn't talk to his friends or to his nephews who were about the same age. “They never went to Vietnam and they wouldn't understand. The only one I could talk to was my dad because he had been in WW2.”

In 1977, Corkey had his first episode of seizures while he was at the VA hospital. They thought that it was because of alcohol abuse, but “when they tested my blood, they didn't find any traces of alcohol”. He receives a small pension from the VA for non-service related injuries. But Corkey believes that the seizures are in fact service-related and that he is entitled to a full pension because, “I didn't have any seizures before I was in the military.” He has crushed vertebrae in his neck and back and continues to have flashbacks of men getting shot and helicopters getting blown up, forty years later. He takes psyche and anti-seizure medication and walks with a cane.

When Corkey first came to Skid Row in 1977, he lived in a homeless shelter and worked occasionally as a fumigator. Today he still lives in a 10x10 room in a single room occupancy hotel, in the same area, and eats at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen. He always comes to the kitchen around 6:39 am, about an hour before we open the garden waiting around to help carry in food donations that are dropped off, and to help volunteers with parking. The rest of his day is spent in his room reading books and watching TV.

“I don't talk to anybody much because I don't want to interfere with their business.” When I said “Well you always come early to the garden, sit at the first table by the door and talk to the same five guys every day. “Well,” he replied, “That's different. They're all Vets.”

“DENNIS”

Dennis is also one of the “coffee klatch” of vets who come early and sit at the first table. Before he enlisted in the Army in 1970, Dennis worked at the Library of Congress as a file clerk. But he had an unusual talent, especially for a young man who only finished high school and was attending a few classes at the local junior college. “I could distinguish languages. I could tell the difference between Russian and Croatian, Slovakian and Serbian, Chinese and Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese. So part of my job was collecting and sorting books for the CIA. Dennis could not actually read the languages and, when asked how he could do this, he said, “I don't know where it came from, I could just do it.”

Dennis was assigned to the 199th Light Infantry and later served with the 101st Airborne. “We were called the 'Red Catchers' because we specialized in catching and killing the VC.” He was attached to the Forward OPS Command in Xuan Loc and briefly took part in the illegal invasion of Cambodia.

He told me that he joined the military because: “I liked getting paid for shooting people.” Later he found out that “It was easy to make money in a combat zone. I knew people in the quartermaster corps and I would transport stuff from one place to another.”

“We were all high all the time, even in combat. You could get anything you wanted. The drug dealers would come right on base and sell. Most all of the officers knew. You could a ‘deck of marijuana’, 20 American style cigarettes with filters on them filled with marijuana for 1000 bat,” (about one US dollar) “there was heroin, opium, speed, cocaine, everything.” Dennis' recreational drug of choice however was Morphine. One time, the roof of his hutch was blown off by mortar fire and he never woke up because “I

had taken twenty of those French sleeping pills.”

Even though he told me that: “I liked Vietnam,” he had issues with his commanders. “In one fire base, the Colonel gave orders not to fire unless fired upon. We saw them out there setting up mortar positions, but we couldn’t fire on them until the mortars started exploding around us.”

His final conflict with authority came towards the end of his tour. “There was this ‘shave-tail’ Lieutenant, just out of OTS. He was young, stupid, and racist. He called all of the black people niggers and the brown people, spicks. He didn’t know anything. All he wanted was for all of us to salute him. He gave stupid orders; he was going to get us all killed. Everyone hated him, even the white guys. So one night, when he stepped into his barracks, all of these claymore mines went off. He wasn’t killed, but I was up on court martial charges for attempted murder. This JAG officer got me off and had me discharged me back to the States.”

Dennis hated the States. He lived in a rough black neighborhood: “It was more dangerous than Vietnam. There were all these people fighting in the streets, shooting at each other.” He started carrying a weapon with him and wanted to shoot back, but: “there were too many cops around.” He wanted to go back to Vietnam and tried to enlist in the Navy, but found that the army had a “hold on me.” In ’75, when Vietnam fell, he called the Vietnamese Embassy and told them he wanted to volunteer to fight for them, They were going to fly him to Washington, D.C. and on to Vietnam, but his father told him “you are crazy.”

In 1976, Dennis ended up in a flea bag hotel on LA’s Skid Row, receiving general relief and working in a “welfare to work” program that eventually led to a full time job as a lab tech at County Hospital. After ten years, he quit and went back on county welfare, augmenting his meager stipend doing day labor, passing out advertising fliers for “Walking Man.” Eventually, a former army buddy at the VA got him a small pension for non-service related injuries. Since then, he has been trying to upgrade his pension to service-related injuries.

Dennis receives a dozen bottles of pills from the VA every month, though none of them he says are psyche meds. But, he claims that he should be receiving \$2,500 a month for psychiatric problems because at one point, he had a psyche interview in a combat zone and that, he says, should qualify him. In the meantime, he still lives on a thousand dollars a month and eats at our soup kitchen, taking home containers of beans and salad to get him through the days on which we are not open.

When I look at the gentle, soft spoken, easy going, black giant that Dennis is today, it is difficult for me to believe that this was ever the young man who “loved Vietnam” because it was a place where he had a good job that “paid me money and all I had to do was shoot at people.”

ANONYMOUS STREET ENCOUNTER

I was standing with six other Catholic Workers near the Downtown Federal Building holding anti-war protest signs.

“Do you guys get paid for doing this?” the tall African American gentleman asked. I explained that we are volunteers and run a soup kitchen on Skid Row about half a mile away, which he realized he knew of as the “Hippie Kitchen.” We do not get paid, I explained, we are Catholic Workers. We all live together with 10 formerly homeless people; we get room and board and a \$25 a week stipend; and we are pacifists.

“What’s a pacifist?” he asked. “We don’t believe in armies or killing people,” I answered, “That is crazy,” he countered, “we are always going to have war, we need armies. I was in Middle East, those people are all crazy over there. All they want is to own the oil and raise the prices. We have to stop them; we need the oil. We’ll always need armies. You’re really naive.” He made no mention of bringing democracy to the Middle East, saving people from a brutal dictator, or even stopping terrorism, just blunt, brutal U.S. Foreign policy. I had to admit that I agreed with him, he was right, so I thanked him, saying, “I appreciate the clarity of your reflections”.

EDDIE

Eddie pushes a shopping cart, lives in front of our soup kitchen, keeps night watch over our place, and smokes crack whenever he can get it. I asked him if he was a veteran, as so many men of his age are. No he said, "I am a draft dodger." I was shocked. Young black men of the Vietnam era were not often draft dodgers, white young men, like myself were the draft dodgers, going to Canada, getting deferments, getting braces on their teeth, claiming to be gay. But, it was a disproportionately large number of men of color, who served and died in that senseless war.

"No I committed a burglary so that I could avoid the draft." Five of his friends from the neighborhood were drafted and went to Vietnam, only three came back. Eddie served 5 years in state penitentiary, "If I had a known that you could get benefits I would have gone." Now he lives on the streets and eats with the other mostly black veterans at our soup kitchen. There are all kinds of wounded "veterans" of the USA's endless wars.

Ever since the beginning of the Afghanistan war in 2001, the L.A. Catholic Worker has been holding a daily vigil at the downtown Federal Building, protesting against the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths of two wars, Abu Grab, Bagram, Guantanamo, and the indefinite detention and torture of prisoners. On Wednesdays, a larger group of 7 to 10 Catholic Workers, holding anti-war posters, participate in a slow funereal walk around the entire Federal complex, culminating with a reading of the names of those who have died in combat over the past week and other victims of U.S. imperial violence. As part of our procession, we walk by the VA clinic where there are always 10 to 20 older vets, hanging out, smoking, and chatting. For the first five years, they looked at our posters and called us traitors and hippies, commies, and yes, worse. It was particularly unsettling when our neophyte summer interns would join us and have to bear these unwarranted insults.

But gradually, after the first five years of futile warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq and thousands of dead U.S. soldiers later, the luster of patriotism tarnished and the old vets began calling out: "Yea that's right, right-on, thanks for doing this." It took a while, but it is my experience that none of the vets that I have met at our soup kitchen have a sense of belonging to the "greatest generation". To a man, they don't believe they have liberated anyone, or restored democracy, or made the U.S. safer. To a man, they believe they were forced to do the unspeakable to the innocent and undeserving; they are cynical, and feel used as cannon fodder for ill-thought foreign policy projects. But you have to remember that this is only the opinion of Veterans who sleep on the streets or live in 10 x 10 hotel rooms and receive the bulk of their nourishment and a good bit of their health care from a soup kitchen on Skid Row. So they might be somewhat prejudice in their point of view.

This August marks the 100th anniversary of the "war to end all wars," but the "senseless slaughter" continues unabated and like a maniacal production line keeps turning out homeless, wounded, rootless veterans.