



Dr. Walter Capps welcomes Vietnam veteran Rose Sandecki to his class.

CATHERINE O'MARA/Nexus

Speaker Addresses Impact of the Vietnam War on Female Veterans

By Catherine O'Mara
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It was a familiar sight in Walter Capps' Vietnam class, as a Vietnam veteran welcomed other veterans home and related the horrors of the war.

This time, however, there was a twist in the talk given during Religious Studies 155 on Thursday.

Rose Sandecki, an army nurse in Vietnam, was tired of hearing only the stories of male veterans. She wanted to point out that tens of thousands of women had also served.

"I hope my brother vets don't feel slighted, because I know that you've been welcomed home a lot — especially in this particular class — but I know today that there are at least two, if not more, women here who were in Vietnam," she said, "and I'd like to say, welcome home."

The nurses in Vietnam were "the wounded healers," Sandecki said; they were so busy taking care of others that no one noticed that they were hurting too.

"We're in a combat zone and the fact that hospitals were supposed to be safe is, excuse the expression, bullshit. The red cross on top of the hospital sometimes I thought made a wonderful target for the enemy."

Although many nurses were not physically injured, the trauma of treating one wounded soldier after another, of watching people die, and living in a combat zone took its emotional toll.

"The military training we got at Fort Sam (Houston) did not prepare us for what it was that we were going to be doing in Vietnam," she said to 90 students and community members, adding that it is important to realize that basic training does not prepare anyone for war.

In addition to many other jobs, the nurses were responsible for attending the thousands of wounded who came through the hospital as they recovered from anesthesia. There were so many, she said, it was difficult to remember all of them.

But for each nurse a few stood out. For Sandecki, the soldier who symbolized all the men she had tended to was one who marked a turning point in her view towards the war and her duration in Vietnam.

She didn't know "John Smith" was in her hospital for the second time, until he awoke from anesthesia. Both of his legs had been blown off.

"Hey don't you remember me? You woke me up the first time," he asked her. Sandecki didn't remember, but she said she did for his sake. She was still by his side,

later that day when the general of the 25th Infantry presented him with an award.

He received a Purple Heart and a gold watch: the medal for heroism, the watch because he was the 20,000th soldier to pass through the hospital.

Sandecki held her own watch in front of her as she told the story to the class. "We're talking November of 1968," she said. "We're talking one of 24 hospitals in Vietnam. And this was already the 20,000th person through the hospital.... It still gets to me when I talk about it."

"John Smith took the watch and flung it back at the general and said, 'Sir, I can't accept it; it's not going to help me walk.'"

She felt proud of "John Smith." His action made her begin to question the war, to feel its impact. "You start questioning your own judgment, your own morals," she said.

She is currently the director of the Vietnam Veterans Outreach Center in Concord, Ca. — one of six females in the U.S. to hold a directorship and the only one who is a veteran of the war.

She uses her own experiences coming home to help other vets adjust to life after war. "I was home in Buffalo, in my mother's kitchen having a hard time making the decision about the breakfast dishes," she said.

"It's a real crazy kind of thing, the change between making decisions about life and death ... to the reality of the 'real' world where people are bitching about the lines in the color television set.... I found I was getting real angry and real confused."

Although she has adjusted, for many the transition has been more difficult, and in some cases, impossible.

The pain and suffering after the war caused many to take their own lives. A sad rumor among veterans, is that in addition to the 59,000 names on the war memorial in Washington D.C., at least 60,000 have committed suicide since returning from Vietnam.

The nation now recognizes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder — the inability to adjust to life after war — and this may be a first step toward understanding the veterans and avoiding a repetition of past mistakes, she said. But to ensure that the same mistake does not recur, she told students to take a careful look at the country now.

"Please start thinking about what's going on in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Don't be naive about it, start questioning it," she said. "You, the men and women of this audience are our future leaders, the future generation, so it's real important that you start looking at those issues."