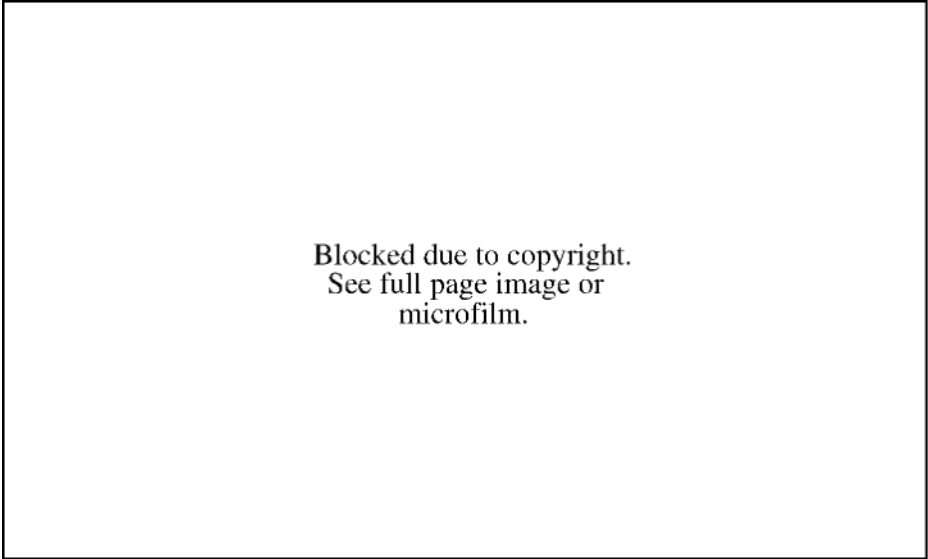


Vietnam War: Veterans Relive Their Horrors in the UCSB Classroom



UCSB vets, from left, Mario Aguilar, Paul Sgroi, Wilson Hubbell, in a salute near Vietnam Memorial.



roror. Capps, far left, UCSB students and veterans at Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.



February, 1985: All quiet on campus with veterans in front rows as counsels, lecturers and monitors of UCSB class on Vietnam War.



February, 1970: Suspects in student anti-war riots near the UCSB campus are detained by National Guardsmen. And a 1985 scene: John Wheeler, right. Vietnam veteran and author embraces fellow veteran Paul Sgroi, who traveled to Washington with UCSB students.

Course Lures 900 at Campus Once Embroiled in Violence

By PAUL DEAN, Times Staff Writer

SANTA BARBARA—Veterans are fighting their unfinished wars here . . . and on a campus that once convicted them.

A former GI talks to a class. He tells of 485 Viet Cong surrounding 80 Americans and how he ripped an enemy's throat with his teeth. He came home and was condemned by an airport protester and bit into that man's neck. Now he trembles because such panic and desperation have not left him.

"When I was your age," says another, "I watched while my best friend's head was blown off. . . . I did speed, black beauties, crystal meth, booze, 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. . . ."

stunned. They are hearing about their unknown war. Vietnam, they agree, was stifled by condemnation while they were growing and largely ignored by their high schools. Beyond movies now old enough for television, they knew little of the horrors, unhappiness and despair being revealed to their class. They respond to the

veterans as young, honest minds will.

Many weep. All stand. They applaud, speak gratitude and even apologize for a previous generation. Then they move forward, crowding the stage, standing six deep around Vietnam veterans in floppy hats and old fatigues. They want to hug these men.

Later, a troubled veteran, hands shaking, discusses the reception.

Suppose such public acceptance had been offered when he came marching home 17 years ago?

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

It is a living education, say these students, a schooling as vital as hearing Abraham Lincoln lecture on the shortfall of emancipation. This is history hot to the touch with a chance to see its participants, to understand them, to assess, challenge and often cry for them.

And so at the University of California at Santa Barbara this quarter they have enrolled by the hundreds—more than 900 from an undergraduate population of

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Los Angeles Times

Walter Capps

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15,000, heavier registration than for any other course on campus, including human sexuality—to study the Vietnam War that former students once died for, dodged or demonstrated against.

It is, however, a class that scores on more than propinquity.

It has stirred student empathies that last year expanded to full community sympathy, and in Alameda Park, with banners, speeches and taps, Santa Barbara County belatedly welcomed its Vietnam veterans home. Overstressed, confused, hiding ex-warriors have left their shadows and found catharsis in lecturing this class, because to face students is to face themselves.

More than a dozen graduates now are working nationwide with the Veterans Outreach Program. That's why there will soon be a Vietnam veterans storefront counseling center in Santa Barbara. Last month, 27 class members paid their own tabs to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. They also passed the hat so that three veterans could accompany the pilgrimage.

"It is the most profound, the most powerful course in America today," said Shad Meshad. He's regional director of the Veterans Outreach Program and its 136 centers going on 200. "It is giving them (students) 'The Big Chill.'"

Yet because of that chilling power, said Walter Capps, UCSB professor of religious studies, founder and near-guru of the course, there must be balance. Polemics are avoided. Politicizing is out. It's pathology without autopsy—to the point where recent class dialogue implying that President Reagan's policies in Central America constitute an overlay of Vietnam was shushed down.

Still, Religious Studies 155, the Vietnam War and American Religion, Its Influence Upon American Social, Cultural and Religious Life, cannot avoid one irony—it is scholarship of calm understanding within a campus and a population where exactly 15 years ago the same topic ignited a 90-day civil war.

Flak-jacketed police on one side. Demonstrating students on the other. Hard hats (remember them?) against hippies. In between there was a riot of bombings, tear gas, helicopter surveillance, curfews and beatings.

A Bank of America branch in nearby Isla Vista was gutted . . . two people died . . . and "Revolution" by the Beatles was the anthem of the day, and of UCSB.

Walter Holden Capps, his doctorate in religion from Yale, was an associate professor at UCSB in 1970. He also was ghostwriting letters for draft evaders; marching in London peace demonstrations, and joining Santa Barbara protests of the Vietnam War.

He was and remains, however, a discriminating pacifist. His protests were not a conscientious objection to all war. Just Vietnam. The war was his confusion as a teacher, as a citizen and, eventually, as program director of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Especially then.

Capps remembers 1977 and a post-war vacuum at the center. Just where did Vietnam fit the liberal philosophy? "What was the center going to do?" he asked. "Some kind of exhaustion had occurred. It was an identity crisis.

The center had known where McCarthyism fitted, but all we knew about Vietnam was that the war had more effect on the American conscience than had been measured. Yet either nobody was talking about it or everybody was tired of talking about it."

Capps organized a conference. The intellectuals showed. So did two Vietnam vets. Shad Meshad, a former captain, an Army psychologist in Vietnam. Fred Downs, author, an infantry lieutenant who lost an arm in Vietnam.

The gulf, remembers Capps, was broader than Tonkin.

"They (intellectuals) were condescending and looked upon the vets as victims," he remembered. "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 with no *vis-a-vis* and *heretofores*."

Little Communication

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

But Capps could see and feel something. "I had a great deal of identification and compassion with their (vets) 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."

And since 1979 and baptism of Capps' 10-week course, the topic and its effects have become indelible on campus. From 60 students to a crowd that despite flu and flat tires often overflows 860-person Campbell Hall. From standard university funding to \$3,000 in private donations this quarter to pay the traveling expenses of blue-chip guest speakers.

Jack Wheeler, veteran, West Point graduate, lesser known as secretary of the Securities Exchange Commission, better recognized as author of "Touched With Fire," a book that suggests a positive, constructive side to the Vietnam War. James Quay, executive director, California Council for the Humanities, speaking for the conscientious objector.

Veterans' Testimony

A chaplain. A psychiatrist. A Vietnam hero who became a governor. And those veterans with their battle talk and four-letter words and painfully individual briefings on PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorders), national contempt, suicide, unemployment—and their personal, ugly, unfinished wars.

"The course details why the war was fought, all the arguments and factions and positions of the conscientious objector and what happened on college campuses," explained Capps. "They (students) are hearing of the squabble between communism and capitalism, (John) Foster Dulles, (Adlai) Stevenson and LBJ, the rise of militant Christianity, the Moral Majority and revisionism."

"But that's not what makes this course . . . it's the testimony of the eyewitness account. And the traffic that goes on through the meeting of

the generations.

"Last year, the students said to the vets: 'We don't think that you are bad.' The vets said they didn't know what they were getting into until they were there and then it was too late. So the vets say: 'Learn before it's too late.'"

"You know, I didn't set this thing up for the vets . . . but they're getting benefit from it."

By reliving experiences, Capps believes, the ex-GIs are easing their pain. Isolation is diminished by students who hear but make no accusations. The supposed gonzo baby killer of 1965 or My Lai or "Apocalypse Now" turns out to be that ordinary-looking guy at the podium who is an electrician and likes cats. Vets have united as students supported, said Capps, and the good word has spread through communities and other campuses to government and positive action.

Obviously, Capps added, the course has tense, crackling moments for student and veteran.

"I was unprepared for it, and the truth is, I felt two things," Capps said. "Personally, I shared the emotion. But at the same time I was nervous for the class because the class had gone beyond the academics to become an event."

There has been another spinoff beyond basic education.

"For reasons I can't quite explain, the course teaches students to realize who they are," he said. "Through the emotional experiences, even the suffering they have to endure, the tears, the reaching out, the agony, they (students) reach dimensions of their own souls, hearts and selves they might not know they had."

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Local veterans who monitor the course are an assortment by personality and purpose.

Genuine Good Samaritans. An attention getter here. The Professional Veteran there. The scarred, the well, the decorated, all ranks, many who took human lives, some who were rear echelon and feel oddly guilty about that, a few made better men by Vietnam and others destroyed by it.

Several lecture the class. All are expert witnesses ready to adjudicate moot points or supply specialist information when there are student questions for other speakers. They are counterpoints, memory banks, ombudsmen and the class conscience.

Several show up in jungle fatigues, medal ribbons and unit insignia. Everything else is at the laundry, jokes one. Then he gets serious. If Latinos and blacks on campus can wear the clothing of their generation and background, he says, then so should the Vietnam veteran.

He is shy and somewhat defensive. So are other vets. That's why, says one, when they meet at the steps of Campbell Hall before each class the gathering is almost a unit assembly.

They enter the hall together. They sit together. Front and right of the class. Their perimeter is established.

On this day, Paul Sgroi, 37, a Santa Barbara city employee, will take the first 30 minutes. He's a regular. He's even written an open letter (12 pages, single-spaced) to he students as course material. He is not well, he says; he was scrambled by a tour as a combat photographer with the 1st Cavalry Division, the deaths, drugs, depression,

booze, nightmares, divorce, emotional withdrawal, a suicide attempt and now a tearful restlessness.

Students are sprawled in the aisles. Knees are hugged to chins. When Sgroi pauses between sentences, the big hall is a silent chapel.

He talks 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," Sgroi 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 is hesitant. It is his first exposure to public disclosure. In a way, he was more comfortable during a 1965 baptism of fire as door gunner on a CH-46 helicopter of the 1st Marine Air Wing. He begins like a rookie at an AA meeting.

"My name is Craig Taylor and I'm a Vietnam veteran. It's taken me 17 years to say that with pride. . . ."

Taylor, 40, a Santa Barbara carpenter, continues. After the war there was Cerritos College and anti-war protesters. He was their eyesore. He didn't fit. Not even with his own family.

Taylor recanted, then rebelled. He became a Vietnam Veteran Against the War. There was grass, acid, a bike 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. I went to see 'Deer Hunter,' 'Coming Home' and 'Apocalypse.' I found myself in the audience crying, breaking down, especially at the sound and vision of helicopters."

Feeling Diagnosed

The feeling was diagnosed. PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. There has been group counseling and meetings with other vets, and then last year's rally in Alameda Park. "People came up to me and I got handshakes, hugs and kisses. Without them, without that, I'd probably still be in a closet today."

There is a question for Sgroi and Taylor. The veterans, obviously, are helping themselves. But what of those who spat in their faces? Are these people mending?

"I hope so," replied Taylor. "I think they are healing by themselves, the same as we are. And we're doing it together."

A student stands. "I personally want to thank you," she said. "We're here because we care. About you."

Across the hall a young man rises. "The lady over there thanked you," he added. "I'd just like to welcome you home."

There is a standing ovation. Students move on the stage and take turns embracing Sgroi and Taylor. Tears on young cheeks. Tears from much older, wearier eyes.

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They weren't born when the war began and were in the fourth and fifth grades when it ended.

So before the course, one student thought Vietnam was close to Oregon. Another related it to a family friend who had served in Vietnam.

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COURSE: Veterans Relive Vietnam Horrors

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He'd come home and stared into the sun until he went blind.

Vietnam, however, has been on the soul of Julie Carol since Nov. 7, 1972. That's when her father was shot down and killed over Laos. That's when a conflict began within a child. That's why Carol, 19, is attending the UCSB course: in search of harmony for herself alongside memories of her father.

The last time Julie saw Maj. John Carol the family lived in family housing at Edwards Air Force Base. She was 6. "I remember scattered things such as the last time Dad came home. He had been to survival school in the Philippines. . . . That was just before he went to Vietnam and I remember he was home for a day.

"My dad was a very devout Catholic, and it was so important for him that we (Julie, her mother and older brother) all went to church together. Then, after church that last day, we all went to this little fast-food stand and had strawberry milkshakes.

"I remember my dad had a mustache that he hadn't had before he went to the Philippines. He was always very jovial. . . ."

Five months later there was a visit from an Air Force casualty team. Julie Carol was forced into a situation known to have overcome many adults. And because of total faith in her father, she recalled, life became complex, painful.

"I thought Vietnam was a very noble thing because my dad was there and that he was serving his country and if my dad was doing that, it just had to be right.

"Then I started to sense in elementary school that it was not a popular war. We moved to Orange where our family was alienated from the neighborhood. . . . It was threatening for them (neighbors) that there was a Vietnam war widow on the block. And I'd get so

angry when other people presumed my mom was a divorcee."

There was a great emptiness within Carol. No place for her in father-daughter events at school. No vacations with mom and dad to brag about. "I learned to handle it because I had to," said Carol. "But it was hard, and I think it affected my relationships with guys a lot because I never had an example, my father."

Carol grew, refusing to learn about the war because that might challenge her opinion of her dad. Then came UCSB and a friend's suggestion that she consider Capps' class as a way of tempering the past. "I didn't know if emotionally I'd be able to handle it," continued Carol. "But a lot of good has come out of it for me because I relate to it. I hear veterans talking about fighting and PTSD and I feel like a veteran. Oh, I wasn't in the war. But I suffered the consequences, the pain, the anger. . . . I hear them talking about coming home and not being accepted, and I know what it's like to be unaccepted."

She also has learned what drove Americans such as her father and why he, as a professional soldier, as a graduate of the Air Force Academy, was obligated to serve in Vietnam. No matter public opinion. No matter the personal sacrifice.

"I understand the situation, what he was doing, why he was there. I'm not sure it was worth dying for, and I'm by no means finished dealing with that. But I think the course has helped the pain. I used to be a little kid who didn't understand. I'm now in the process of becoming a big kid who is learning to understand more."

She also is understanding that good memories are much better than no memories. She treasures a red lacquer jewelry box. It was a gift from Vietnam mailed in advance by a father who was shot down four days after his daughter's

7th birthday.

When Carol graduates from UCSB there will be another delayed memento. Her mother has it in safe keeping. It is her husband's Air Force Academy ring.

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With the course comes cross infection. It has touched Walter Capps. It could end his leadership of the class.

"I don't know if I can do it next year," he acknowledged. "I can't keep going on and on because it does take an awful lot out of me."

The problem may well be what others have considered to be the greatest asset of the course—Capps' devotion to teaching and his intense sensitivity for the subject and its players.

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

Capps also is a gentle man. Home is the dignity of upper Santa Barbara Avenue and a huge, ancient barn converted into a two-story residence in the '30s. There's music and poetry, cats and social tennis here.

Yet to guide a class, Capps must get blood on his hands from a war he didn't attend. A grim experience at best. A guilty one, he has theorized, at worst.

"But it's a price I'm still willing to pay," Capps said. That's because his friends, his Vietnam veterans, are pushing him toward a new challenge. It is 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, to make it part of the community, to get it registered someplace and to file it away.

"I want to tame this thing. I really have to corral it."