

UCSB course on Vietnam War opens eyes and hearts

By Pamela Harper
News-Press Staff Writer

Few students who enrolled in Walter Capps' UCSB course on the impact of the Vietnam War on religion in America thought they would become emotionally involved in the class.

They were wrong. At times during the quarter-long course the emotion-charged testimony of former soldiers who experienced the horrors of Vietnam electrified Campbell Hall.

On the last day of the class, Capps tried to sum up why the course had struck such a nerve in the 550 enrolled students, some of them veterans.

The answer might be the age of the college students in the class, he said.

Because many of them were still in elementary or junior high school when the Vietnam War ended in 1975, they are too young to hold preconceived notions about the war's effect on American life or harbor negative feelings about the thousands of American soldiers who returned from the war, Capps suggested.

The students who listened to Vietnam veterans describe horrifying experiences in the jungles of Southeast Asia are members of a generation "that hasn't been tarnished in the same way" as older generations have been.

America's involvement in Vietnam marked a turning point in the country's history, the country emerging from the war years with its innocence lost and

58,012 dead, Capps told the students.

The course Capps designed — which may be the only one of its kind in the nation — tells the story of the Vietnam War from the point of view of those who fought in it.

At times the veterans used the forum as a confessional, Capps said. For one veteran, it was the first time he had talked publicly about his three tours of duty as a field artillery officer in Vietnam.

John Murphy, a 49-year-old who looks 30, was the sole surviving officer of an infantry company that was involved in "very heavy" combat in 1967.

"I didn't expect to get personally involved in the course. I took it because I had heard it was a good course

and I wanted to see what other people were saying about Vietnam," Murphy said.

"What I got out of the course was that an awful lot of young people were interested in us and why we were there. Up to that point no one was interested in us," he said.

At first Murphy had no intentions of telling his classmates of his war experiences, but one day he approached Capps and asked him if he could speak to the students.

"It was incredible," Murphy said of the students' reaction to his talk. He got a five-minute standing ovation, he said. Other speakers included Arthur Blank, former head of psychiatry at Yale medical school and with the Vet-

erans Administration in charge of readjustment counseling centers for Vietnam veterans.

Capps has taught the course for five years but the timing of this quarter with other events made the quarter unique, he said.

The most significant event to happen to Vietnam veterans since the end of the war was last week's ceremony in Washington when an unidentified Vietnam veteran was laid to rest in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

For Murphy, the ceremony conducted by President Reagan, closed a chapter in his life.

"As far as I'm concerned the Vietnam War is laid to rest," said Murphy.

For others the ceremony and the course opened new doors. May Okihiro, a 22-year-old biology major who took the course to meet a general education requirement, said "the class opened my eyes to something I was blind to."

Initially "I had no interest in Vietnam and I didn't think the course would affect me like it did," Miss Okihiro said.

But she ended up getting emotionally involved to the point that she and several other students painted a banner for the Santa Barbara veterans who spoke to the class over the past several months. The banner, signed by most students in the course, welcomed the former soldiers home from the war.

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