

Veterans' Day, 2003

by Randy Rowland,
Army, 1967-1970



Many months into this invasion, my fellow veterans are talking about how much Iraq reminds them of Vietnam. There are many dissimilarities between the two, of course, but a quagmire is a quagmire, no matter the name.

In 1971 Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized Operation Dewey Canyon III, where a thousand vets, fresh back from Vietnam, threw their medals clattering onto the Capitol steps in Washington DC. The image of veterans renouncing the war with their own medals was politically more powerful than plutonium. People paid attention.

Meanwhile, GI resistance was directly impacting the government's ability to wage war against the Vietnamese. The Pentagon later admitted that when Nixon withdrew ground forces from Vietnam, and went to the air war, it was because the troops had become "unreliable." I take considerable pride in helping that happen. Many GIs came home from Vietnam and killed themselves. But there were others who dedicated their lives to fighting against injustice. Look around today, 30 years later. The movement is packed with vets who just can't drop out.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq started with a fragging. Before it is over, there will undoubtedly be varied GI resistance. Most American soldiers are not natural born killers. They are fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, kids who gambled that there wouldn't be a war and lost. They would fight to defend America, but this is different.

Some Iraqis are committing suicide, most typically with explosives in their truck. U.S. troops in Iraq have had their

share of suicides as well, numbering in the dozens. But they are not suicide bombers. Nor do American (or any) GIs kill themselves because they are getting shot at. Veterans know that American soldiers kill themselves because of what they are ordered to do. A video clip the other day showed American GIs beating an Iraqi with their rifle butts at a check point. Veterans know how powerful a moral dilemma it is if you are even in the area when that sort of thing (or worse) happens. The choice between humanity and uniform has driven many good men mad.

Veterans of the Vietnam generation understand a situation where you can't tell friends from enemies, where the people you were supposedly sent to protect aren't acting like you were promised they would, where nothing is going right, and where there isn't enough underarm deodorant in the world to stop that nervous stench coming from your pits. But for every GI who would rather die than live with what he or she is being ordered to do, we can count on many more who will find ways to resist. Even more than that will return home and sooner or later join our movement. They will bring with them both the thousand click stare and a level of devotion to the notion of "never again" that will take the whole movement to another level.

I'm of the opinion that if there hadn't been a huge anti-war movement in the Vietnam days, even more of the returning troops would have taken their own lives once home. It is often incorrectly stated that the reason Vietnam vets had "problems" was because they weren't honored on their return. Quite the oppo-

site. At a certain point vets didn't need a hippie chick dripping spittle to tell them that the war was wrong. They were coming back from the horror of war, having helped bring that horror to the Vietnamese people. The movement wasn't a *problem* for many Vietnam veterans it was a chance for redemption. Those vets tried to change public opinion away from supporting the war. But for many, the only opinion that really mattered was the opinion of the guy in the mirror.

Now, once again, American GIs are sighting down their barrels at civilians. Johnny will come marching home again, perhaps to throw their medals once more at the government which sends generation after generation into wars of conquest. Many fresh forces will join our movement. They will be fierce in their determination, because they will bring with them the ghosts of countless Iraqis, known only to them.

They are coming! We must stand firm on the barricades, take heart in the streets. The cavalry is coming. Many will be on our side. They need us and we will be mighty glad to see them.

I take the opportunity of Veterans Day to salute the GI resisters, and welcome into our ranks those returning soldiers who will dedicate their all to the creation of a better world. Welcome home, brothers and sisters, we have work to do.

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Call to Conscience from Veterans to Active Duty Troops and Reservists (VCC)

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