



BUSTING MYTHS

ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR
ONE CLASSROOM AT A TIME

On select college campuses today, educators are teaching about the controversial war in Southeast Asia as it was meant to be taught—objectively. **BY JANIE BLANKENSHIP**

Moments after a 30-minute firefight that killed six GIs and wounded 12, soldiers of B Co., 1st Bn., 16th Inf., 1st Inf. Div., await evacuation during *Operation Billings* in June 1967.

In the more than 40 years since the U.S. military role ended in Vietnam, much has been written about its divisiveness. Early on, college professors teaching about the war largely conveyed personal perspectives rather than presenting the whole picture.

And while this might still be true today, a number of professors across the country choose instead to teach the war more objectively, letting students draw their own conclusions.

From the Naval War College to the University of Southern Mississippi and places in between, these teachers share a common theme in their classrooms: correcting misconceptions about Vietnam veterans.

Here is a look at how the Vietnam War is taught by four professors and a former high school teacher.

WARRIORS BENEFIT FROM VIETNAM LESSONS

At the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, R.I., students arrive early for the class *Vietnam—A Long War*. Soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines quickly settle themselves for a lively three-hour discussion of the war. They talk about books, the “hippie culture” and media biases—specifically, the press “always and unfairly bashing” U.S. troops.

They watch films, view slide-shows and offer up insightful comparisons between fighting wars in Iraq or

Afghanistan and fighting the war in Vietnam.

Leading the way at the front of the classroom are Vietnam vets Al Bergstrom and Art Weber, who have been teaching the course since 1998 when it was first offered. At times they act as mediators of sorts, throwing out questions to entice more debate.

“How much is truth, and how much is revisionist history?” asks Weber. “Why did the public turn against indi-

vidual soldiers?” He served first as platoon commander in B Co., 1st Marine Recon Bn., then assistant operations officer with Headquarters and Service Company, and finally commanding officer of A Company in Vietnam.

While Bergstrom and Weber modestly provide details of their service during the war, they also rely on guest speakers.

Former POW Porter Halyburton and his wife, Marty; Bing West; and Marshall

“I don’t teach them what I think was right or wrong about the war ... I want our students to pound this stuff out and make their own decisions about the war.”

—AL BERGSTROM, INSTRUCTOR AT THE U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, R.I.

Plt., A Trp., 4th Sqdn., 12th Armd. Cav, 1st Bde., 5th Inf. Div. (Mech) in Vietnam during 1970-71. “I want our students to pound this stuff out and make their own decisions about the war.”

Carter are among the well-known Vietnam veterans who spoke during the semester.

“You couldn’t buy the experience and stories provided by our guest speakers,” said Bergstrom, who was wounded March 25, 1971 in Vietnam. “I actually learn so much myself from all of the speakers each time.”

With each question, the warriors in the class seem hungry to demonstrate their knowledge and express opinions.

Bergstrom and Weber present the facts and offer little opinion or personal interpretations of their own.

Students learn from one-on-one interactions with veterans, as well. Each student is required to interview a Vietnam veteran and present his findings in the final class. The interviews are then submitted to the Vietnam Archive Oral

“I don’t teach them what I think was right or wrong about the war,” said Bergstrom, who served as leader of 3rd

PHOTO BY JANIE BLANKENSHIP/VFW



From left, Air Force Col. Darrell F. Judy, Marine Col. Christopher G. Dixon, Navy Lt. John M. Gleason, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Thomas E. Clarity, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Jeremy M. Bauer and Navy Lt. Cmdr. Jason A. Lautar engage in discussion in the class *Vietnam—A Long War* in April 2014 at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.



VIETNAM VETS AS INSTRUCTORS:

From left, Army Maj. Thomas Carroll, Al Bergstrom, Art Weber and Army Maj. Dwayne L. Wade continue the discussion on the Vietnam War after class in April 2014 at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, R.I. Students Carroll and Wade are veterans of both Iraq and Afghanistan. Vietnam vets Bergstrom and Weber teach the course *Vietnam—A Long War*.

“The press was always so unfair. In 1975, for instance, we weren’t even there, but were blamed for ‘losing’ the war.”

—ART WEBER, INSTRUCTOR AT THE U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, R.I.

History Project at Texas Tech University.

“The interview portion is especially important because it allows family members to talk,” said Weber, who served from July 1968 to July 1969 in the southern part of I Corps and was wounded in October 1968. “Sometimes it’s the first time they have talked about the war. It’s a good communication link.”

Navy Cmdr. Ken Kelly, a student in the 2014 spring semester, interviewed his uncle, who served in the Army’s air cavalry during the Vietnam War.

Kelly, who is half Vietnamese, was born in Bien Hoa in 1971, and his family moved to the U.S. in 1975. For him, this class was very personal.

“I have a much better understanding and appreciation for my heritage,” he said. “I learned so much about Vietnam’s history because I took this course.”

Bergstrom says there are a number of students each session who have family members who served in Vietnam.

Student Greg Finn’s dad was aboard

the *USS Hopewell* from 1966-67, and his uncle did two tours with the Marines. Finn is in the Army, having served both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite his familial connections, Finn says he took the course to understand what went wrong in Vietnam.

“I think we will face more insurgencies in the future,” he said. “We could really benefit from the lessons learned in Vietnam.”

Supplementing the classroom discussions and guest lecturers is an extensive required reading list. Among the books on the list are *The Village, We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young* and *Why We Lost in Vietnam*.

The class is broken into small groups and assigned portions of each book to read and report. This allows for several books to be studied.

During class, Bergstrom and Weber often show a series of photographs on the overhead projector to illustrate how the media misrepresented images.

One of the photos is “Napalm Girl,” showing a little girl running naked down the street, crying after having been severely burned. Even today, uninformed Americans will see the photo and shake their heads, wondering how their country could have hurt that little Vietnamese girl.

In reality, the Vietnamese Air Force’s 518th Squadron dropped napalm over Trang Bang after mistaking the fleeing villagers for the enemy.

“But who got blamed?” Weber asked. “The press was always so unfair. In 1975, for instance, we weren’t even there but were blamed for ‘losing’ the war.”

A common topic of discussion in class is the lack of preparedness before entering Vietnam.

Tom Carroll, who served with the 3rd Infantry Division in Iraq and Afghanistan, said he feels like the U.S. failed to understand Vietnamese culture.

“More importantly,” he said, “we didn’t learn from the French war. North Vietnam all but told us they would fight forever. But we didn’t listen.”

Serving three tours in Iraq with the Army, student Scott Snyder agrees, saying there is “great value” in understanding the enemy.

“We had no real preparation for Vietnam,” said Weber, a member of VFW Post 7277 in Massapequa, N.Y. “For instance, we would have known about what was to happen during Tet if the U.S. had read up on things a little better.”

Bergstrom, a member of VFW Post 4487 in Middletown, R.I., has returned to Vietnam numerous times in recent years. He uses those experiences in the classroom, as well.

‘NO STEREOTYPICAL VIETNAM VET’

Andrew Wiest was 12 when the last U.S. troops left Vietnam in 1973 and 14 in 1975 when Saigon fell. And while he says, “It wasn’t my war,” he vividly recalls watching coverage of the events in Southeast Asia on television.

He became fascinated with the war and began asking a lot of questions at home and at school. But no one could seem to answer the questions he had. He said that his great-grandfather was an educator and the most intelligent man Wiest had ever met, yet even he could not tell him much about the war.

For Wiest, the Vietnam War became

“But there is no stereotypical Vietnam vet either ... We run into them every day and probably don’t even realize it.” —ANDREW WIEST, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

the intellectual version of the creek near his house. His mom always told him not to go play in that creek, but he did it anyway. When he decided to delve into the study of the war, and others shook their heads at him, he was only more determined to learn everything he could.

A professor at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg since 1987, Wiest’s passion for that long war in Vietnam has been shared with hundreds of students. He has been teaching a course called *The Vietnam War* since 1997.

“The course simply needed to be taught, and I volunteered to teach it,” said Wiest, who also has authored numerous books on Vietnam.

For so many years, he said, the way the Vietnam War has been taught around the country, if at all, is usually inaccurate. He said the younger generation needs to look at the war historically.

Wiest likes to torpedo the myths about the war and its veterans. He wants to tackle the misconceptions head-on. One way he does so is by showing Eddie Adams’ Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a South Vietnamese general executing a Viet Cong prisoner.

“It was a photo that affected the judgment of many Americans on the nature of the war in Vietnam, but it was also a photo that provided no context for that judgment,” Wiest says.

He uses the photo when he is teaching about the 1968 Tet Offensive. He said it helps students appreciate the importance of context and perspective.

“Sure, bad stuff is out there,” he said, “it was a freaking war. But there is no stereotypical Vietnam vet either. They are just like everyone else. We run into them every day and probably don’t even realize it.”

With so much to learn in one semester, Wiest assigns students a variety of books to read and discuss rather than a single textbook. Wiest begins the semester with the evolution of Vietnamese culture. He said to understand the war and why we were there, “it’s important to understand the people.”

But no amount of reading can compare to what Wiest believes is the best way to teach the war.

He opts to have Vietnam veterans come and talk to his students. Since he began teaching the class 17 years ago, about 80 different veterans have spoken in his classroom.

When Wiest first decided he wanted to get veterans into his classroom, he contacted VA and was put in touch with a PTSD doctor who suggested that it would benefit the veterans to talk about their experiences.

Wiest said that first classroom visit was unnerving because people often have the preconceived notion that PTSD is the equivalent of being “crazy.” And for the Vietnam vets, many were stepping into a college classroom for the first time. There were reservations on both sides.

“But it was magic,” Wiest recalls. “The feedback was phenomenal.”

One of the first vets to speak was John Young, who was a squad leader in C Co., 4th Bn., 47th Inf., 9th Div., in Vietnam during 1967. After that first meeting, he asked Wiest if he could come back and

sit in on another class the next time the course was offered. Wiest said no but that he wanted him to come back and help him teach the class.

“Since then, he has come to every class, unless he is sick,” Wiest said.

Wiest said that Young, who has a 100% disability rating due to PTSD, has found the class to be therapeutic. Young has proven to be both an “impassioned educator and eloquent speaker.”

“It’s a powerful relationship between the students and the veterans,” Wiest said.

One of several books written by Wiest is *The Boys of ’67*, which is about Young’s Charlie Company. It was made into a television documentary (*Brothers in War*) for the National Geographic Channel and aired in March.

Wiest also takes students to Vietnam for a study abroad program. A small group of veterans accompany the students. The vets’ expenses are entirely paid for. Their only requirement is to talk about their experiences with the students when they get back to where they once served.

Most of the students in Wiest’s class are

VIETNAM VET SPEAKER + PROFESSOR/AUTHOR



PHOTO COURTESY ANDREW WIEST

Vietnam vet John Young, left, has been a staple in Andrew Wiest’s class on the Vietnam War at the University of Southern Mississippi for several years now. He is one of numerous veterans who speak to Wiest’s students throughout the semester.

“With Vietnam, there is a sense that you came back damaged. But it’s just not historically accurate to say that.”

—PHILIP NAPOLI, PROFESSOR AT BROOKLYN COLLEGE, N.Y.

typical college-age students. He also gets a large representation of ROTC cadets. Interestingly, not too many of the students have family members who served.

Wiest has had Iraq and Afghanistan veterans take his class. They relate well to the veterans who come in to speak, Wiest said.

“This is something I could never give them,” Wiest said with regard to that veteran-to-veteran relationship.

Students are required to conduct interviews with veterans or someone from the Vietnam War period. He said even if it’s a grandma who watched the news of the war every night, it’s still a perspective.

INTERVIEWS ARE ‘HIGHLIGHT’ FOR STUDENTS

In Philip Napoli’s classroom at Brooklyn College, the idea of learning from Vietnam veterans is commonplace, as well. Napoli, who was born in 1960, grew up with the Vietnam War, which is why he jumped at the chance to teach it starting in 2001.

In his course, *Vietnam and the American Experience of War*, Napoli requires each student to conduct interviews with veterans.

“My students can learn something from me,” said Napoli, an oral historian and avid researcher of the Vietnam War. “But nothing can substitute for listening to the recollections of someone who was there.”

Most of the time, Napoli’s students are able to find veterans who are willing to talk. But if a student cannot turn up a vet, Napoli reluctantly will help.

“I want them to really work at it,” he said. “Sometimes I have students find someone they never even knew was a Vietnam veteran. These are, for many students, the first veterans they have ever spoken with. It is a highlight of the term.”

Napoli said that students’ preconceived notions about the war underscore the importance of talking firsthand with veterans.

“It’s not uncommon for students to imagine—before I teach them otherwise—that most of the Army that served in Vietnam was drafted, and largely

African-American,” Napoli said. “Many arrive believing that Vietnam veterans committed and witnessed atrocities every day. Few come to the class with a sense of the intensity of combat in Vietnam.”

He added that most of his students—who are older than typical college students since they largely started college later due to working—have no understanding of the gigantic logistical effort the U.S. made in Vietnam and the consequent demands on personnel.

“With Vietnam,” he said, “there is a



PHOTO COURTESY PHILIP NAPOLI

At Brooklyn College, Philip Napoli teaches a course on the Vietnam War. He requires his students to interview Vietnam veterans. Napoli is the author of *Bringing It All Back Home: An Oral History of New York City’s Vietnam Veterans*, which strives to debunk the stereotypes of Vietnam veterans.

sense that you came back damaged. But it’s just not historically accurate to say that.”

He adds that yes, most who go to war do come back “changed.” Still, that should never be confused with being “damaged.”

In his book, *Bringing It All Back Home* (2013), Napoli writes about Army nurse Joan Fuhrey, among other Vietnam vets, who wanted nothing more than to serve her country and do her part.

“She was a true believer,” Napoli said. “But she was traumatized by war. Yet she went on to lead a productive life and ran the Women’s Division of the VA in New York City.”

The goal of Napoli’s book is to debunk the stereotypes about Vietnam veterans using the stories of average New York City veterans. His experience interviewing more than 200 vets helps when instructing his class on interviewing.

In addition to their extensive interviews, students are required to read a selected novel about the Vietnam War as well as a memoir. Recent examples of these are *The Things They Carried*, *Rumor of War* and *The Killing Zone*.

Napoli provides students with a large number of documents, including the *Pentagon Papers*, for this 14-week course.

“I spend a fairly significant chunk of time sketching out the background of American involvement in Vietnam,” Napoli said. “I find that, without it, students have a hard time understanding why we were there in the first place.”

Napoli’s class primarily comprises students in their mid-20s to early 30s. Most of them work, and a lot work full time. Consequently, Napoli said, their college careers tend to be longer than four years.

In a class of 30, Napoli estimates that perhaps two or three have family members who served in Vietnam. Sometimes, more than that number will have relatives who were in the military during other eras.

With degrees in U.S. and European history from Columbia University, Napoli worked as a researcher with Tom Brokaw for his books *The Greatest Generation* and *An Album of Memories*.

Interestingly, Napoli’s mom, who was a social worker, worked at a VA hospital in the 1950s, where she helped WWII veterans. She later taught a course on the Vietnam War as a professor at the University of Cincinnati. She had many vets speak in her classroom, too.

OPEN-MINDED STUDENTS

Like Bergstrom and Weber, Jim Willbanks is a Vietnam veteran bringing his personal experiences into the classroom. His course is offered periodically at night at the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence, as well as at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at

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Teaching Vietnam Through 'Service Learning'

THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL FUND (VVMF) launched the *Hometown Heroes Service Learning Project* in June.

Available for high school educators nationwide, the curriculum offers four lesson plans focused on collecting photos and stories of veterans and participating in community service:

- **Remembering Those Who Sacrificed During the Vietnam War**—Students interview family and friends of someone who died in the war. They present a biography to their classmates and submit photos to VVMF.
- **Preserving Veterans' Personal Stories**—Students interview veterans and write an essay about the veteran. They also submit photos of the vets.
- **Commemorating Our**

Veterans—Students are encouraged to volunteer at or plan a ceremony honoring local veterans to coincide with Memorial Day or Veterans Day.

• **Understanding Healing Through Memorials**—Teachers can arrange a field trip to a war memorial.

According to Sharon Deane, director of education at VVMF, the curriculum is flexible, so it will be popular with teachers.

"Teachers can spend one day or several months on any portion of this," Deane said. "It gives them the tools they need, but allows for flexibility."

To work out any potential kinks, a pilot program ran from January through May of this year. It involved 50 teachers and 3,000 students representing 23 states. Deane said the teacher and student feed-

back was all positive.

Six of the teachers completing the program each brought one student to the official launch June 25 in Washington, D.C.

Deane said this project is beneficial for VVMF as well. With the collection of so many photos expected, it will ensure that history will have a face.

VVMF also is building a database of high school educators who instruct courses

about the war or are interested in teaching about it. Teachers interested should visit www.vvmf.org/vvmf-education and enter their e-mail address and ZIP code.

To download a copy of the digital *Hometown Heroes* curriculum, visit www.vvmf.org/hometown-heroes.

Deane said she hopes VVMF members spread the word at schools in their communities.



Nic Barber, a seventh-grade student from North Middle School in Westfield, Mass., discusses his veterans project with Rep. Richard Neal (D-Mass.) during the *Hometown Heroes* launch in Washington, D.C., on June 25 at the Library of Congress.

PHOTO COURTESY VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL FUND

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Ft. Leavenworth, Kan.

At KU, *Topics in America and the Vietnam War* is offered as a junior- and senior-level course. Willbanks said that while most of his students are history majors, he does see a wide range of study disciplines.

"Sometimes my class just fits in best with personal schedules," said Willbanks, who was an infantry advisor with a South Vietnamese regiment during the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

ROTC students are common in his class. At KU, he does have a few students who are Iraq or Afghanistan veterans.

Vietnam: An American Ordeal (1990), by George Donelson Moss, is the primary reading material for his class. Willbanks covers the period from 1950 to 1975 for teaching purposes.

Saying he likes to "put a face to the stereotype," Willbanks invites other veter-

ans to speak to the class once during the semester. He is a member of VFW Post 56 in Leavenworth.

"It really is a high point in the course," he said. "For some of my students, it's the first time they have talked to a Vietnam vet."

Students ask the vets questions like, "Why did you go to Vietnam?" and, "What did you think of the country?"

"I tell them, 'Don't ask what you don't want to know,'" Willbanks said. Such as "Did you ever shoot anyone?"

At KU, students have two exams—mid-term and final. They are required to write a 10-12 page paper based on interviews with Vietnam veterans.

Willbanks says the oral history papers are "pretty meaningful" for both the vets and students. One vet commented that he was surprised anyone was even interested in his personal story.

Unlike the students at Brooklyn College, Willbanks says most of his students don't have the same negative ste-



Jim Willbanks, a Vietnam veteran and VFW member of Post 56 in Leavenworth, Kan., occasionally teaches a class on the Vietnam War at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Willbanks, who served as an infantry advisor with a South Vietnamese regiment during the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive, uses his experiences in the classroom. He also teaches at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth.

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reotype of Vietnam veterans as those in the past.

He finds that, for the most part, students come into the classroom with an open mind.

"Students just don't have the same baggage as they did years ago," Willbanks said. "In the '70s, no one wanted to admit he was a Vietnam veteran. Today, you have people who fake being a veteran."

At the Staff College, Willbanks, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, teaches officers who often comment to him on the "striking similarities" between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Vietnam.

Each officer is required to write an

argumentative essay on lessons learned or not learned in Vietnam. Then they put their own military experiences in it, as well.

In the end, Willbanks said he doesn't sway his students one way or the other. He leads them to the facts and lets them draw their own conclusions about the war.

"Veterans typically did their duty, came home and went on with their lives," said Willbanks, who has authored or edited 14 books. "The vast majority of Vietnam veterans are proud of their service."

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM CLASS

Institutions of higher learning are not the only places the Vietnam War has

been taught. For 10 years—1988-98—Long Island's Locust Valley High School in New York offered its students a course on the Vietnam War.

Teaching the class during this time was Bill Ober, a veteran and member of VFW Post 9263 in Elwood, N.Y. After his retirement in 1998, the school discontinued the class.

When Ober began teaching the class, it was because Ivor Parson, then the History Department chairman, was a Vietnam veteran who wanted the war taught.

Parson said that when students were polled about what they would like to see added to the curriculum, Vietnam was at the top of the list.

Ober was at first reluctant to teach it because he is not a Vietnam vet. When



TEACHING THE VIETNAM WAR IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Marine veteran Bill Ober shares military memorabilia with students at an elementary school on Long Island, N.Y. Ober, who taught a high school-level course on the Vietnam War for 10 years, now visits schools all over Long Island.

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he finally agreed, he knew the class shouldn't be tested on a textbook.

Instead, he thought students should experience the war through the eyes of vets who fought it. He also believed it important to add the perspective of those back home.

"Really, the best way to teach this war is by bringing it into the classroom," Ober said.

Ober said that at first he was worried about coming up with enough speakers to fill an entire semester. But by word of mouth, veterans began contacting him, asking if they could come in and talk.

"There were so many people who wanted to be a part of this," Ober recalled. "They just wanted to be involved with what we were doing at the school."

On one occasion, a Green Beret who spoke Vietnamese brought a Viet Cong flag into the class. Another time, an anti-war protester who had gone to prison to avoid going to Vietnam came in and tried to share his views.

"He was not at all popular with the students," Ober said, laughing.

Ober said students really connected with Gertrude and Bob Moinester. Their son, Robert, was killed in Vietnam on Jan. 31, 1968.

The *New York Times* heard that the parents would be talking to the students and sent a reporter and photographer to take pictures. Gertrude read one of her son's letters to the class. She and her husband talked with pride about the *USS Moinester*, named after their son.

During that first visit, Bob asked the students a pointed question: "This is your country. You should serve it. How

many would volunteer to serve one year for your country?"

About 80% of the students raised their hands.

After he started teaching the course, Ober discovered that many of his colleagues were Vietnam vets. That was something he never knew because they simply did not talk about it.

"This class ended up being the most popular elective in the school," Ober said. "I had some students try and enroll a second time."

Students were tested based on the speaker presentations. Each student also was required to choose a book about Vietnam and write a book report.

Ober admits that most of the students had misconceptions about the Vietnam War and its veterans before taking his class. He believes they were swayed by the media or family members.

"After listening to multiple veterans," he said, "their attitudes had vastly changed."

Ober received his draft notice in 1961 but decided instead to enlist in the Marines. He served until 1967 and was stationed at Guantanamo Bay during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. He later became a Marine bugler.

Today, he continues his work in schools but on a volunteer basis. He gathers a contingent of veterans and makes the classroom circuit all over Long Island.

With educators such as these working hard to debunk negative stereotypes about Vietnam veterans, perhaps the tide is finally turning. 🇺🇸

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