National Convention Stresses Resilience, Resistance and Non-Violent Revolution

By Steve Books

The theme for this year’s convention held August 3-7 at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, was resilience, resistance, and non-violent revolution. After checking in, I attended the opening ceremony where a Native American Veteran performed an opening song and then the group “Warriors for Peace” drummed to commemorate peace. A Gandhi impersonator reiterated the themes of peace and non-violent revolution.

WORKSHOPS:

Counter Recruiting- Noah Mrowczynski reported that he ended up in the infantry after being promised an assignment with a tank division in 2004 Iraq. He recommended the video Before You Enlist, and promoted “Opt – Out Forms”, where high school students in the delayed entrance program can opt-out by simply not showing up at the induction place. He said counter-recruiters should question students on the “why” for joining and try to be objective making sure that counter-recruiters have the same access to schools as military recruiters. It was heartening for me to hear this from a recent veteran. Mrowczynski said he found it hard to deal with the practice many recruiters have of equating patriotism with militarism.

Homeless Veterans: In the next workshop, Mark Foreman gave a presentation about what Chap. 102 in Milwaukee is doing for homeless individuals. Milwaukee seems not to be set up as well as Madison is for homeless shelter access. After many years of seeing homeless folks around Milwaukee, Mark and another VFP member Dennis Johnson wanted to help, especially when they discovered that many homeless folks were veterans, both men and women. As a Marine corpsman in Viet-

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It has been about a year since I began getting medical care at the VA and, for the most part, I have found it to be pretty good. I can order my meds on-line, I’ve been offered a free hearing aid, and my doctor even called me twice when I got sick last month to see how I was doing.

Recently, I was diagnosed as having a mild case of diabetes. I’m not overweight and get regular exercise, so I wondered, “why me.” My doctor said that my pancreas probably was just aging a little quicker than the rest of my body. OK, I thought. That makes sense, I guess. So, I took my pills twice a day and my blood sugar readings improved.

One day, while I was waiting for an appointment at a diabetes clinic, I overheard two vets talking about their disability payments.

“What’s your disability,” I asked.

“Diabetes,” one said.

My jaw dropped. “They give disability payments for diabetes?”

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“I was in Vietnam during the war,” he explained, “and was exposed to Agent Orange.”

I had heard about the Agent Orange controversy and how the government had recently decided to provide benefits for veterans who were having health problems due to exposure.

“I was in ‘Nam too,” I said, “but I don’t think I was exposed to Agent Orange.”

“If you were in Vietnam during the war you were exposed,” he said. “It was in the air, in the water, and in the food. One of the diseases it can cause is Type 2 Diabetes.”

He told me to contact my Veteran’s Service Officer, which I did. The assistant officer I talked with said I had a pretty good chance of getting some benefits and helped me fill out the forms. Now I’m waiting for my check in the mail. One thing you learn when dealing with the VA, is how to wait.

On Aug. 10, 1961, the United States began spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam, in a campaign called “Operation Ranch Hand.” The spraying lasted nearly 10 years and resulted in death and disability for more than 3 million Vietnamese, including the children and grandchildren of those directly exposed.

In addition, this deadly defoliant seriously damaged the environment of Vietnam. An area of 7.5 million acres were sprayed affecting nearly 26,000 villages and hamlets. Large areas still contain hot spots of contamination.

If you were in Vietnam and have diabetes you should make an appointment with you Veterans Service Officer. This office was created to help veterans. They are your friend. Their office is located just inside the Martin Luther King Jr. entrance to City-County building in room 108. Phone: 608-266-4156.

(Some of the information for this column was taken from a posting by Carol Miller at CounterPunch.org.)
Vietnamese Teacher, Peace Activist Do Receives Global Citizen Award

Last month the wounds of war continued their slow healing process as a lifelong Vietnamese peace activist and teacher received a Global Citizen Award from the United Nations Association-USA of Dane County at their monthly meeting at Edgewood College.

Pham Van Do humbly accepted the award for his lifetime of sacrifice and work improving the lives of his countrymen. He has been working with the Madison Quakers for two decades building schools, houses and setting up micro loan funds. Joining him was Mike Boehm of Madison Veterans for Peace who has been Do’s liaison in the projects and has made many trips to Vietnam.

Do’s activism is uncommon considering his past. His grandfather was imprisoned and tortured to death during the French occupation of Vietnam for supporting the national liberation movement. Do’s father was also imprisoned by the French at the same time, later released then executed by the Viet Cong in 1964. Do’s brother was killed by US and South Vietnamese Army forces. Instead of letting bitterness destroy him, he became a peace activist, demonstrating with the Buddhists while going to college in Saigon. He graduated from the University of Pedagogy there in 1977. After graduation he had no job and was disillusioned. Eventually he got a job as a teacher working with mountain tribes in the central highlands, but was given barely enough money to buy food. Later he got a job teaching in Quang Nai province where he met Boehm. Today he teaches English and operates an interpreter’s service.

The program at Edgewood began with a showing of the award winning documentary, Sound of the Violin, produced by the Vietnamese government to help commemorate the 30th anniversary of the My Lai massacre in which U.S. Army soldiers murdered 502 men, women and children on the morning of March 16, 1968 in a small hamlet in Quang Nai Province. Boehm, who was not at the massacre, but is a Vietnam veteran, had been wrestling with remorse over that incident and others ever since he got back from Vietnam. As a form of therapy, he picked up a violin and taught himself how to play. His playing was so soulful that the film’s director used it in the title of the film.

After the movie, Boehm and Do spoke of the many projects funded by the Quakers that they are involved in.

MY LAI LOAN FUND: Established in 1994, this fund provides small loans to very poor women. The Madison Quakers have established loans in seventeen villages and have provided over 2,500 loans to poor women. Investment for each loan fund now averages $8,000 per village. At the end of the loan period the funds are repaid and then loaned out to another group of poor women.

PEACE PARK: The dedication ceremony held on March 16, 2001, also marked the beginning of construction of the My Lai Peace Park. Boehm says, “The park acts as Yin to the My Lai Memorial’s Yang. The existence of the My Lai Memorial continues to remind people of the horrors of war and one leaves there filled only with despair. A visit to the My Lai Peace Park fills one with hope.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL: In the fall of 1998 the Madison Quakers funded the construction of a three room primary school for My Lai. This was the first in a series of primary school buildings constructed by funds provided by the Madison Quakers.

OUTREACH TO ETHNIC GROUPS: Quang Nai Province has worked with the Madison Quakers. The programs the Quakers have been implementing for the ethnic people these past five years are micro-credit programs. They hope to expand their programs to include digging wells for fresh water, building kindergarten schools, and primary schools.

AGENT ORANGE: In March, 2005, the Madison Quakers implemented their first project to help the victims of Agent Orange. These defoliants contained dioxin, a highly toxic chemical, which caused severe birth defects and high rates of cancer. The response was to fund “compassion houses.”

These houses are made of durable brick and cement walls, cement floors and tin roofs. Each house costs $1300. “For women who had been living in ‘houses’ made from mud or weeds or scraps of wood and plastic, having a house that won’t melt under the monsoon rains or blow apart during high winds is beyond their imaginations,” says Boehm. “For the first time in their lives they are safe.”

At the end of the meeting a woman asked Do, what enabled him to keep going. “We have no choice,” he said. “Vietnam started from ruins after the war. We had no friends. We were isolated from China and had the US Embargo. We had to use our own hands to rebuild our communities and our lives. We couldn’t just stand there and die.” -RC

Donate at www.mylaipeacepark.org or send a check to Madison Quakers, Box 1461, Madison, WI 53701-1461 (tax deductible)
VFP PARTNERS WITH SUPER GROUP BANDALLAMAS FOR 11/11/11 CONCERT AT BARRYMORE THEATER

Dynamic super group Bandallamas, along with some very talented colleagues will be taking center stage at the Barrymore Theatre on November 11 for their special "Power of Eleven" (11/11/11) showcase. Since 11/11/11 is Veteran's Day, the group is partnering with Veterans For Peace in hopes that the music will bring us all together and allow the group to donate a portion of the evening's proceeds to their cause (a scholarship foundation).

The concert begins at 8:00pm, following a 5:30 – 6:30pm meet-and-greet open to VIP's, charitable ticket purchasers and sponsors that will feature members of the band as well as honored guests/distinguished Green Bay Packer alumni Chris Jacke, Ahman Green, Bill Schroeder and others.

Bandallamas (www.bandallamas.com) feel now is a perfect time to bring their inimitable spirit of sound and limitless musical soul to Madison, beloved hometown to several band members. Their diverse lineup of rock, blues and jazz vets includes Rob Wasserman, Richard Davis, Wally Ingram, Victor DeLorenzo, Pauli Ryan, Chris Aaron, Bobby Bryan and Lisa Bethke, as well as an impressive list of guest players - Clyde Stubblefield, Jim Schwall, Jimmy Voegeli, Tony Menzer and Annalee Scully.

The blogger, Rock and Roll Detective, wrote, in November of 2010,"The Bandallamas are an eclectic group of rockers, blues and jazz vets who somehow found each other stretched across the US from LA to Denver, and Madison to Chicago. Their music incorporates tribal beats, reggae, blues, jazz, funk, rock, and more; transporting their audience through an all-embracing sound of an irresistible world beat. This eclectic group of artists transcends categorization (in the tradition of Traffic, Blood Sweat & Tears (Exp) and Steely Dan), while creating their own unique spirit of sound. These musicians are transporters of the vibe – through the legacy of the ages; the essence of musical spirit and origin – music's very roots."

For event information, contact Lisa Bethke. General admission tickets are $17.00 in advance, $20.00 day of show, and can be purchased at Sugar Shack, Star Liquor, MadCity Music, B-Side, Frugal Muse (Northgate & Junction Rd.), Strictly Discs, the Barrymore online at barymorelive.com or call & charge at (608) 241-8633. Charitable tickets cost $35 and are available at the same outlets. A portion of the proceeds from the show will go to Veterans For Peace.
nam, Mark felt a duty to act. He found many homeless veterans at food pantries and under bridges. In addition to helping folks with shelter issues, the chapter also helped pay for bus passes. The chapter has assisted over 70 veterans so far. Mark and Dennis look for funds in many places and said that Milwaukee Lutherans seem to donate the most. Marquette University has a list of grant foundations that they have used, and have raised over $100,000.

Golden Rule: Along with Mark’s workshop time, there was also a VFP member from Eureka, CA who is working on the restoration of the “Golden Rule,” a sailboat that was used in 1958 for protesting nuclear weapons. Fredy Champagne found the boat under water and is currently rebuilding it. There’s more information at: vfpgoldenruleproject.org. Fredy reported that the ship will sail in the Great Lakes sometime with a goal of advocating against nuclear weapons and nuclear power.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): David Philipps, author of the book, Lethal Warriors, and a journalist by trade, gave a first hand look into why recently returning vets from the same 500 person unit from Fort Carson kept on getting arrested. He sarcastically related that although the soldiers were given McDonalds cheeseburgers upon their return, much more was needed. David is as young as most recent veterans, an interesting dynamic to me in that he’s a non-vet who is interested in the effects of PTSD on veterans his own age. Jessica Goodell, a Marine Corps veteran of the Iraq War is author of the book, Shade it Black: Death and After in Iraq was assigned to a Mortuary Affairs Unit in Iraq. She told sad stories of collecting personal effects to be sent home with soldier’s bodies. She said being the only female in her platoon was “its own monster.” Jessica also reported that she had to deal with many soldiers who committed suicide. Dr. Ed Tick, a psychotherapist and author of War and the Soul, is the founder of Soldier’s Heart – see www.soldiersheart.net. He stated that many wounds are in the heart, and that the first casualty of war is the truth. Dr. Tick also recommends viewing George Carlin on PTSD on YouTube. He says that VFP mourns losses on both sides and advocates that we must restore people through atonement and activism. Healing is a lifelong struggle.

Nuclear Disarmament: The first afternoon session was on nuclear disarmament education. Bill Wickersham, from Columbia Missouri, is founding director of Missouri Peace Study Institute. He explained that, as a society, we have psychological blocks regarding the severity of nuclear armaments. People tend to glaze over the issue by thinking that, due to arms treaties, there now are only 26,000 warheads worldwide. Other issues discussed were American exceptionalism- American’s erroneous belief that might makes right.

Blood on the Tracks: Brian Wilson, a Vietnam vet, was nearly killed in 1987 during an action where his legs were run over by a train during a protest in California. His book – Blood on the Tracks: The Life and Times of S. Brian Wilson, tells a story that is more powerful than a locomotive. Recalling villages he walked through in Vietnam that had been napalmed, he asked, “How can the U.S. continue to commit war crimes?”

Saturday, August 6, included the VFP 2011 business meeting. Many VFP resolutions were discussed and adopted. See Veteransforpeace.org/conventionresolutions-211a.vp.html for details. One item from the VFP Treasurer was that chapters should make an effort to contact lapsed VFP members from their chapter rosters.

Saturday afternoon we saw another film about soldier LaVena Johnson, who was shot dead in her tent in Iraq in 2005. The army reported the death as a suicide, but there were signs she had been beaten. The case is still being looked into. There was also a training in non-violent protest in preparation for the October 6, action in Washington DC. They stressed to never get into an argument with or make contact with someone who disagrees with you.

The convention was great and I thank Chapter 25 for giving me the opportunity to attend. The convention is streamlined on the VFP National website now. See www.veteransforpeace.org.
Counter recruiting in Southwestern Wisconsin high schools began September 21 at River Valley High School in Spring Green. For most of the past decade, members of Veterans for Peace Chapter 25 have met with students in many high schools to propose alternatives to the military and to describe the realities of life in the military and in war. Our hope this year is to extend our efforts even further by adding one or two more schools to those we visit in small towns outside of Madison.

Rural high schools in Wisconsin remain the focus of military recruiters trying to fill the ranks of the “all volunteer” military branches. Rural districts are popular with recruiters because most of the students graduate successfully, yet they can’t find a job.

That’s why this year is very promising for our counter recruiting efforts. Why? Because Eric Cobb, executive director of the Building and Construction Trades Council of South Central Wisconsin, has generously offered to take time from his very busy schedule. For many reasons I was grateful to have Eric with me in Spring Green on September 21. Eric is young, dynamic, informed, dedicated, and determined to place the labor movement more directly where it traditionally belongs: side-by-side with the peace movement, with the human rights movement, and the universal quest for peace and justice. Unions and veterans for peace belong together.

Eric’s knowledge of the trade unions’ apprenticeship programs, and his persuasive reasons that young people should seek careers in much-needed peaceful jobs are not only important for the students but also are really a boost to my personal morale. For some years, as I’ve stood in high school lunch rooms waiting for students to come to our VFP table to talk, I’ve realized that I’m more of a grandfather than a peer to young people. That’s not bad, mind you, and generally the students are polite and respectful. But Eric Cobb is a presence that will certainly reach more and more students as we speak about alternatives to the military. For example, Eric is a musician. He told me that he was a punk rocker.

That kind of experience will be very helpful in making inroads with students in the schools of the 21st century.

Sometimes working for peace may seem thankless. But we’re committed to incremental and peaceful change. The namesake of Chapter 25, Clarence Kailin, exemplified an unbending consistency as he worked for peace and justice for his entire long life. He’s our example.

Eric Cobb fits the mold of Clarence Kailin, two or three generations removed. Even though his job requires a mind-bending schedule of meetings and organizing efforts, he willingly spent time counter-recruiting with me. And his only reward, other than the hope we gain in talking to young people, was a Veterans for Peace t-shirt and a “Peace is Patriotic” lapel button.

During the counter recruiting session, we were present for two lunch periods. The first was mostly ninth and 10th grade students, 15 and 16 years of age. Our display was set up at the edge of the cafeteria, close to several lunch tables. I noticed several of the children at a table very carefully
examining our display and talking about it. Eventually, a student approached the table and we began discussing things like the military budget as opposed to the education budget.

Within a couple of minutes, he was joined by everyone seated at his table and several others. They told me they were freshmen. It was one of the most satisfying counter recruiting experiences I’ve had, because they stood in a group and really paid attention. Our impromptu peace class lasted for more than five minutes, an unusually long time given how hurried students are in schools.

I gave a lot of literature to those young boys, along with a copy of Addicted to War, which they promised to share since they were buddies.

When the students left to return to classes, I marveled at the possibility that they might someday become prime material for military recruiters. Those 15-year-old people deserve peaceful careers. They deserve training in vocations that will be useful personally and to their communities. They don’t deserve to be hassled by the enticements of military recruiters or to be trained in techniques of war and killing.

That’s why counter recruiting is so important. With the valuable support of people like Eric Cobb and labor unions, there is real hope for reaching more young people and teaching them about alternatives to violence.

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**POSTER EXHIBIT SHOWS DANGER OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

On July 15 and 16 (the 66th anniversary of Operation Trinity) Clarence Kailin Chapter 25 sponsored an exhibit consisting of more than forty posters as a reminder of the danger which nuclear weapons still constitute.

For you old-timers, the posters were from the exhibit which was originally presented at the VFP national conference at Columbia, Missouri in 1996. The panels have, for some time, been resting in Peter Shaw’s garage in State College, Pennsylvania and Peter and Sandy Kelson deserve much gratitude for transporting them to Wisconsin for the occasion.

The exhibit was held in the Main Hall of Madison’s Capitol Lakes Retirement Center, who graciously hosted the event. The facility is located just three blocks from the Wisconsin state capitol and there was a very good public attendance. That this was a success is attributed to by the visitors’ many comments; for instance, one of them said, “Thank you so much for this display! It has given me very much to think about.”

The event opened on a Friday morning with an address by Lincoln Grahlfs. After making clear that the sponsors of this exhibit insisted that it was not about why nuclear weapons were used in 1945, or even whether they should have been used, but was presented as a precaution against the horror that could result if they ever were to be used again. He then briefly explained the mission and principles of VFP, talked about his own experiences as an Atomic Veteran, and concluded by pointing out that the nuclear weapons in the hands of the major powers today are actually a thousand times as powerful as the ones dropped on Japan and also by describing, in some detail, the nightmare of (so-called) depleted uranium.
Veterans for Peace
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