

# My long turn against the war: One nurse's story on the 50th anniversary of the My Lai Massacre

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**By Susan M. Schnall**

In 1967, I was a Navy nurse at Oak Knoll Hospital, which was built during World War II in Oakland, California, to care for the Marines wounded in the Pacific. I had joined the service to alleviate suffering by caring for wounded troops from the war in Vietnam. By 1969 I was court-martialed for my actions *against* the war.

I vividly remember the nighttime screams of pain and fear at Oak Knoll. Badly injured young men would dream their nightmares of war, of dead and dying buddies, rotting in the dense jungles of Vietnam. They would scream their agony: 'My leg, my leg, it's been blown away.' 'I'm in pain, nurse, nurse, please give me something for the pain.'

I did what I could, dispensing pain medication, talking with patients, trying to soothe their fears and quiet their moans.

1968 was the height of the war. I watched the battles on TV and lived the war at work. For me it was personal. My father, a Marine, was killed on the beachhead of Guam in 1944. He felt he had to do his share and help give something to this world. I never knew my father except through pictures, letters and others' memories. World War II was a war I've lived my whole life. It destroyed my mother and her hopes and dreams and future.

As I cared for the wounded of yet another war, I wondered when this destruction would end. I trained the corpsmen that would be sent overseas with the troops and put in harm's way. I helped heal the wounded so they could be returned to the front line. I opposed this terrible destruction and waste and yet I had become a part of it. I knew I could no longer be silent. As a member of the armed forces, it was imperative to inform the American people that there were active duty GIs—many thousands of us—who were against the war.

A GI and Veterans March for Peace was organized in San Francisco for October 12, 1968. We put up posters around our hospital base, publicizing the demonstration, but they were quickly torn down. We knew we had to get the word out.

The TV news showed the U.S. Air Force dropping 'informational' flyers on the Vietnamese, telling them to go to "protective hamlets" away from the fighting and spraying of deadly herbicides.

A pilot friend and I rented a single engine plane, filled it with thousands of leaflets and dropped them over Bay area military bases and the deck of the USS Ranger at Alameda Naval Air Station.

One day later I was given a new Navy order stating that we could not wear their uniforms when "participating in a demonstration with knowledge that its purpose was in furtherance of partisan views on political issues."

I wondered about its legality since General Westmoreland wore his uniform in front of Congress, asking for more money, armaments, and troops. Why couldn't I wear my uniform and speak out against the war? And so, I did.

The next day, along with several thousand people, including 500 active duty military, I marched down Market Street to Civic Center, wearing my uniform. Soon the Navy determined there was enough evidence against me to convene a general court martial. I continued my nursing duties at Oak Knoll and worked on an underground paper we distributed on the base.

On February 3, 1969, I was convicted of two charges: conduct unbecoming an officer for promoting disloyalty among the troops and disobeying a Navy regulation for wearing my uniform in a peace demonstration. I was dismissed from the service and sentenced to six months of hard labor.

More than 58,000 Americans and 3 million Vietnamese were killed in that war. This week, Veterans For Peace is bringing a delegation of 22 veterans to Vietnam to learn about the country and its culture and to bring people together for reconciliation, understanding, and healing. We will take part in a commemoration of the My Lai massacre and the opening of an exhibit called Waging Peace at Saigon's War Remnants Museum. The exhibit will display, for the first time, the underground newspapers, photographs, posters and films of the GI peace movement. The VFP tour will conclude with the gathering of American and Vietnamese veterans. Our healing and reconciliation continues.

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