

Refusing Complicity, Choosing Service by Wayne Wittman

Wayne Wittman served in the U.S. Navy from 1948 to 1951. He is employed as a State of Minnesota rehabilitation professional, and was an active trade unionist from 1958 to 1991. He is a charter member of Veterans for Peace Chapter 27, and chairs the VFP Chapter 27-SOA committee.

Not to be served but to serve was the theme of the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocesan permanent diaconate ordination class of 1984. As a member of this class I thought I was a pretty good fit. I had been a Minnesota state employee as a rehabilitation counselor for 26 years. I really enjoyed helping people with disabilities find ways to remain independent. I was successful enough to be valued by my employer, and my supervisor had recommended me for the diaconate program three years earlier. The last of our five children had finished high school, my youngest daughter and her older brother were in college, and the older three had finished college and were employed. So the children would not be branded as “preacher’s kids.”

My wife Joan and I did not know what God had in store for us, but we both felt we would do the best we could with whatever came along. I had been an activist for opportunities for people with disabilities, a labor union officer, and was active in opposing the Vietnam war—so I saw my ordination as a spiritual affirmation of my life choices and life style. I knew that I would be required to take a vow of obedience, but I did not think Archbishop Roach would require me to do anything that I couldn’t do, or that would be hurtful to the Church that I loved.

I had taken an oath to obey the President of the United States when I enlisted in the Navy in 1948, so this wouldn’t be a new experience for me. Born on September 11, 1929, I was 12 years old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. I experienced our country going through this tremendous era of patriotic zeal, when we all seemed to be tuned in to the goal of defeating the Germans and the Japanese. As a teenager I marked the progress of the war and I was impatient to get old enough so that I could do my duty and get into the military, as I saw my older acquaintances doing. In August 1945 when I was 15 years old the war ended; my dream of having a military career was put on hold as my mother wanted me to finish high school.

I graduated from Humboldt (Iowa) Public High School on May 22, 1948, and I was sworn into the U.S. Navy on May 25, 1948. I enlisted in the Navy as a Hospital Recruit which meant that the Navy agreed that I would be sent to Hospital Corps school and become a Hospital Corpsman. I had some interest in studying medicine and this would give me a feel for that profession, but I was looking at the Navy as a career. I went through boot camp and Corps School with no problem, and was assigned to Long Beach Naval Hospital and subsequently to the Naval Training Center in San Diego.

Coming from a poor family in a small town, I championed a Navy career as the most rewarding way for anyone to spend their life, even when I knew that the Marines used Navy Corpsman for their medics, and I had heard the Hospital Corps had the highest per capita casualty rate of any of the services. I had requested sea duty several times but my request had been denied. I found that a serviceman in peacetime is not appreciated like he is when there is war, and my war came on June 25, 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea.

On July 1, 1950, I was ordered to sea duty on a ship with the 7th fleet, bound for support of the UN forces in Korea. I recall examining my government’s response to the invasion of South Korea by North Korea, and our role in the United Nations’ intervention, attempting to repel aggression according to the principles of the United Nations Charter. I felt our action was warranted if we were to have a world where nations respected each other’s territorial integrity, which I thought was the most effective path to world peace. (This is a position I still hold and still think has the most promise for world peace.)

Navy corpsman Wayne Wittman with mother and three sisters, August 1950

I loved the Navy and I was sorely disappointed when my Navy career ended, as I was found to have advanced pulmonary tuberculosis and the Navy found me physically unable to perform the duties of an active-duty hospital corpsman. After several years in the Veterans’ Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I went to college and studied the social sciences in order to be a high school social studies teacher.

My studies included political science, economics, and history. I found the devastating effect of war on our world and our culture to have been a tragedy throughout history. But I was encouraged that we—as a world—had found principles that would allow us to avoid war, if we were persistent in applying them.

As a student I met Joan, and we got married and started having children. I finished college, got a job, and things were going along pretty normally. Then, in the latter part of the 1960s, I suddenly noted that my government was intervening in the internal affairs of another country. When that intervention became a full-scale war, I started to protest my government's actions in Vietnam.

As a military veteran, I became a leader in our community's local protest movement, especially in my church, my union, and my political party. There was a movement that I was a part of called Veterans for Peace. In 1973 our involvement in the Vietnam war finally ended, and I thought we surely had learned not to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations.

Then, as an activist in political affairs in the 1980s, I noted that my government had initiated actions in Nicaragua that were illegal, and that concerned me. I remembered that in the '60s and '70s people had doubted my credibility because I had not physically been to Vietnam, and this had handicapped me as a Vietnam war protester.

So in February 1987 I took a travel seminar to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. I was appalled at the oppression in El Salvador and my government's complicity in it. I also found that we were arming, paying, and supplying a force called the Contras, whose role was to terrorize the population of Nicaragua and disrupt the democratically elected government of that country. It seemed that the principles promoting peace, for which I had been willing to risk my life in the UN action repelling aggression in Korea, were now being violated by my government with impunity.

I found that I was not alone, as other military veterans voiced the same concerns. There was an opportunity to join a veterans' peace action team monitoring U.S. actions in Nicaragua. I joined in November 1987 to monitor a truce in Nicaragua, and while with this team I learned about a renewed organization called Veterans for Peace, Inc.

The Veterans for Peace Statement of Purpose reads:

We, having dutifully served our nation, do hereby affirm our greater responsibility to serve the cause of world peace. To this end, we will work:

- * to increase public awareness of the cost of war,**
- * to restrain our government from intervening overtly and covertly in the internal affairs of other nations,**
- * to end the arms race and to reduce and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons, and to abolish war as an instrument of international policy.**

To achieve these goals, members of Veterans for Peace pledge to use nonviolent means and maintain an organization that is democratic and open, understanding that members are trusted to act in the best interests of the group for the larger purpose of world peace.

The Veterans for Peace national convention in 1992 acted in support of nonviolent actions to close the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, which is adjacent to Columbus, Georgia. Steve McKeown, one of our VFP chapter members, then spearheaded an effort to take old discarded doors to various events in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area with the slogan "Shut the Door on the School of the Americas." Persons were asked to sign the doors as petitions, and the doors were taken to local Congresspersons to petition them to close the SOA.

By June 1993 we had over 20 doors with more than 10,000 signatures and did not know how to use them. A decision was made to take the doors to Fort Benning and present them to the commandant of the SOA with our request to close the School. The doors were loaded into a utility trailer and a contingency of 13 people in three vehicles journeyed to Columbus, Georgia. Father Roy Bourgeois was informed of our plan and arranged a reception with the local media. We arrived in Columbus, Georgia on June 14, at which time we held a press conference and informed the Fort Benning personnel and the community of our plan to enter the Fort the next day.

On Flag Day, June 15, we were met at the gate of Fort Benning and informed that, if we persisted in entering the Fort, we would be arrested, fined, and imprisoned. We had not thought we would be stopped as we were just expressing our constitutional rights; instead our constitutional right to petition our government for redress of grievances was violated. We left the doors with Father Roy, but told the Army "We will be back!"

Two months later at the national Veterans for Peace convention of 1993, our Minnesota Chapter 27 presented a resolution for a VFP national rally at the gates of Fort Benning in January 1994, which would call for closing the SOA. Father Roy Bourgeois was the keynote speaker at this convention, and our chapter was given special recognition for our "Close the SOA" effort. We have heard that Newsweek magazine picked up on the trip we made in June 1993 and later did the story "A School for Dictators," that appeared in their August 1993 issue.

Our Veterans for Peace chapter has continued to be an active participant in the effort to close the SOA, and many other groups in our community have taken leadership in the effort as well. Our VFP chapter was able to present a resolution calling for closing the SOA before the Minnesota AFL-CIO; it passed in Minnesota, later was presented to the National AFL-CIO, and subsequently has been adopted as their position. It is important that we continue to expose the SOA, as it clearly shows how our foreign policy serves the “haves” and oppresses the “have-nots.”

It is obvious now that the military in Latin America is used to oppress the poor and keep them from having a fair shake in life. We need to change this policy in order to promote world peace and justice and express concern for others—particularly the poor. Many of us firmly believe that when we the people of the United States have the facts, we want to do the right thing. For us to be honored as a people, we need to examine our nation’s story; where we are less than honorable, we need to change and do what will promote life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for everyone.

Many of us —when we found out what was happening in Latin America, and recognized our complicity in the terrible oppression of the people —could not sit idly by and see such atrocity, intimidation, and human degradation continue. Father Roy Bourgeois and others found that the School of the Americas was central to the oppression of the Latin American people; SOA Watch, subsequently, has provided leadership and exemplified perseverance in the struggle to call attention to the plight of the poor and our need to change our policies.

Some of our most valued freedoms are our rights to free speech and free assembly, as well as the right to petition our government for redress of grievances. Our right to search for and act on the truth as we see it is essential to our freedoms. This principle is what many of us thought we were defending when we risked our lives in the service of our country, and we are still willing to risk our lives to preserve this principle today.

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Email written by Wayne Wittman Mar 1, 2015

To: VFP#27

My concern is how to maintain Veterans for Peace and its relevance to our culture and values today. We have had 5000 years of known war and we are wanting to initiate a change to 5000 years of peace and sustainable civilization. This is no easy task but one that thinkers and planners have been working at for the 5000 years. **We have a unique opportunity to have had experience in war and know firsthand the reality of our statement of purpose and can make a unique contribution to this effort.**

Vatican II calls me to work every day for peace and instructs me that peace is not something that we can achieve and then forget but requires daily effort. My reading of history notes that we thought we had it with the Kellogg-Briand peace treaty but we let our guard down and it failed to work. We need to laud that effort and continue to work to make it a reality.

I do not expect to achieve our goals while I am alive, but **every day I have a goal to find an effort to promote what I value and VFP gives me a unique vehicle through which I can join with others (who have much better credentials than mine) to promote a better life for everyone.** I am so glad I found you all and love you all very much. Wayne