

The Donald P. Dorsey Public Interest Law Fellowship

Donald P. (Don) Dorsey is not a lawyer. But he is a Viet Nam War veteran. This is his story:

“In May of 1968, after completing my fourth year of a 6-year study in Pharmacy at the University of Texas at Austin, I quit school to join the Marine Corps. At the time, The Corps needed troops badly and was offering a 2-year enlistment. Although I was against the war and had attended a few anti-war rallies in college, I still felt obligated to serve my country, even in a bad war. At the time, my twin brother was a Marine rifleman already in Vietnam. I was 22 years old. I refused Officer Candidate School (OCS) as offered by the recruiter.

I entered boot camp (MCRD San Diego) Dec 2 and began my training. I did well and quickly moved up from squad leader to right guide (acting platoon sergeant). At the end of training, I graduated top Marine in my platoon of roughly 90 guys and received the leadership award. I was designated Honor Man, receiving a promotion and a free Dress Blue Uniform, and assigned the military occupation of basic rifleman. I was again offered OCS, but again refused.

My next stop was Camp Pendleton where I entered Infantry Training Regiment (ITR) serving as Squad Leader. Next came Basic Infantry Training (BITs) where I became acting Platoon Sergeant, though I only held the rank of PFC. Older than most trainees, I could readily see that these young kids were going to get me killed. At that time in Vietnam, the casualty rate for Marine riflemen was 50%. I volunteered for special training as a Scout Sniper. After a thorough background check, I was accepted into the sniper program at Pendleton, where I graduated in a tie for first place. Just prior to that time, my twin had been wounded. After a couple months in the hospital, his foot was patched up, and he was sent back into the field, limping. Because of the “Sullivan Law,” family members can refuse to serve in a combat zone at the same time. I waived that right so as to replace him in combat. I arrived in Vietnam in June of 1969, and my twin was sent to Okinawa a couple days later. Shortly thereafter, his company was hit hard and many of his friends were killed.

A regimental sniper, I was assigned to First Marine Regiment south of DaNang, where I was “issued” out to field units in 2-man killer and reconnaissance teams. Early in my tour, I was sent to an advanced sniper school in DaNang, where I graduated number one in my class with a perfect score, a rare occurrence. Because I was a good shot and knew my field craft, I moved up quickly from Spotter to Team Leader to Squad Leader. Toward the end of my tour, I served as acting Platoon Commander for 2 months. At the time, I was only a Corporal. After serving 11 months and 27 days as a sniper, my tour was complete. I left Vietnam for San Diego. Six days after leaving Vietnam, my promotion to SGT caught up to me, and I was honorably discharged under the “early out program” and sent home to Port Neches, Texas. That was June 1970. I had served roughly 19 months in The Corps. Although I’d been running assassination teams and reconnaissance missions for a year, I received no decompression and no psychological evaluation. Coming home was a culture shock. If you’re interested, google “Don Dorsey – Coming Home.” I wrote a story of the experience for my high school class reunion in 2009.

Unable to concentrate and with a lot of combat baggage, I worked construction as a pipefitter in the refineries of Southeast Texas. In 1972, I moved back to Austin to try to resume my studies, but could no longer do chemistry. I worked as a carpenter until I was able to enter the UT School of Fine Arts. In 1975, I received a BA in Fine arts, graduating with mostly A’s. Several of my art projects were entered into the student museum. I worked as a free lance artist for several years doing ads and logo design.

But having difficulty relating to regular people, my only friends were Vietnam veterans. Several of us became active in veteran issues, working towards the return of live American Prisoners of War from Vietnam and towards health care for veterans exposed to Agent Orange. I was one of those veterans exposed. At the time, there were no national Vietnam veteran organizations, only local groups, with The Brotherhood of Vietnam Veterans the most active in Austin. In those days, Vietnam veterans were shunned by established national groups like the VFW. I worked with the Brotherhood until Dan Jordan, the President, was able to reach a national settlement for veterans with debilitating effects of Agent Orange. The organization then fell apart.

Recognizing a growing need for a good community service Vietnam veteran organization, 6 of us in 1975 chartered a State group called the Texas Association of Vietnam Veterans (TAVV). I became the Treasurer. We quickly grew into a large organization and took over VFW Post 856, one of the VFW groups who had refused us membership. TAVV was innovative and established several programs, adopting the Kerrville VA Hospital and starting a Vietnam oral history project whereby we visited local high schools to relate our war experiences. Our hospital program consisted of visiting the hospitalized veterans once a month to feed them and socialize and play bingo with them. TAVV gave away \$100 each month in bingo prizes. As for the history project, I was placed in charge of organizing it. At one time, TAVV had 7 chapters across the State. I often served as chapter delegate at State meetings.

Over the years, I've held every office except Chaplain. Currently, I'm in my seventeenth year as Austin Chapter President. Even though we are down to only 2 active chapters in Texas, I'm also State President and have been for 6 years. We're old now, but TAVV is as active as ever. We have a reputation of being the go-to veterans' organization in Central Texas. We still spend time at the Kerrville Hospital and still talk to school kids. We added a Homeless Veteran component several years ago with Joe Boatman in charge. It was his service to homeless veterans that led to the Thrift Store, which helped to get many veterans off the streets. TAVV later added an Honor Guard team of which I'm Commander. We perform Combat Cross Ceremonies at veteran events and funerals.

About 2004, I was asked to become involved in the newly proposed Texas Capitol Vietnam Veterans Monument (TCVVM) to be erected on Texas Capitol grounds. With my background in art and with my connections to the veteran community, I became a member of the Design Committee. After a design was chosen and the committee dissolved, I was then asked to continue as a member of the TCVVM Executive Committee, a steering committee composed of 12 local veterans. During my time on the Executive Committee, I served on every ad hoc committee and became liaison to the sculptor to insure accuracy in the final monument. The sniper on the 5-man combat grouping was designed from photos of me. At the monument dedication in 2014, I spoke of my Vietnam experiences to a historic crowd of 4500 people.

As part of the Executive Committee, I was also tasked in 2012 with creating a project to honor the 3417 Texans killed or missing in Vietnam. We wanted to have something for the families to honor those who lost their lives. Originally called the "the 3417 project," it was later renamed "The Texas Vietnam Heroes Exhibit." I hand-stamped two sets of dog tags with the names, ranks, hometowns, and dates of casualties of each individual and then created an interactive display. One set of tags hangs in the display, while the other set was ceremonially entombed inside the 14-foot monument now located in the Northeast corner of Capitol grounds. The display won 5 first place design awards and traveled to many Texas communities throughout a 2-year tour. It's now on permanent display at the Museum of the American GI in College Station.

Through all of this, I never married, never had a family, never could hold a job very long. I never did adjust to normal life after Vietnam. I give talks to veteran groups and at events about my experiences in Vietnam and with PTSD. This past December, I spoke to an Army group in Lubbock about coping with PTSD and am scheduled to speak at a Marine Reunion in San Antonio in May. I've also recently become active with the Suicide Prevention Channel. Vietnam took a lot from me, but it gave me a purpose. I'm 100% disabled due to PTSD and other health issues and unemployable. But I help veterans as a veterans' activist.

I'm a member of or participate in the following:

Texas Assn of Vietnam Veterans, State President
Texas Assn of Vietnam Veterans, Austin Chapter President
Marine Corps League
Disabled American Veterans / life member
Scout Sniper Assn
First Marine Division Assn / life member
VFW Post 856 / life member
Austin Memorial Home Assn, President
Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 915, delegate / life member
TAVV Honor Guard, Commander
Suicide Prevention Channel, steering committee
Texas Capitol Vietnam Veterans Monument, Executive Committee
Texas Vietnam Heroes Exhibit, creator"

When asked if we could name this Fellowship in his honor, Don replied:

"I'm humbled and honored by your desire to designate a fellowship in my name. My devotion to public service was merely a means of survival in the war after the war. However, I was raised by loving parents to always help those less fortunate. Vietnam was our generation's lemon. After many years of removing seeds, public service became my lemonade. It still is. Of course you may proceed. Thank you.

Semper fi!
Don Dorsey
SGT, 1st Marine Division
HQ, 1st Regiment
Scout Sniper
Vietnam 69-70"

The Donald P. Dorsey Public Interest Law Fellowship is awarded in hopes that the recipient will be inspired by what a dedicated war veteran like Don Dorsey has done in the public's interest as an essential part of his life, and will make a similar commitment.

Donald P. Dorsey