
STOLEN VALOR

*How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed
of Its Heroes and Its History*

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<i>Prologue</i>	xxiii

PART I: THE IMAGE

1 A Year in Vietnam	3
2 Welcome Home, Baby Killer	36
3 Will the Real Vietnam Vet Stand Up?	47
4 The Ragtag Brigade	74
5 CBS Hits "The Wall Within"	87

PART II. THE TRAUMA OF WAR

6 Atrocities: The Good War Versus the Bad War	109
7 The Creation of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	139
8 Rambo: An American Hero	162
9 Would I Lie to You?	175
10 The VA and the PTSD "Epidemic"	213
11 The Vietnam Veterans' Guide to Tax-Free Living	234
12 PTSD Made Easy	254
13 "Vietnam Killed Him": Suicide	296
14 An Army on the Streets: Homelessness	309

PART III. STOLEN VALOR

15	The Purple Heart Flea Market	349
16	Fudging the Records	364
17	War Stories and Other Lies: Writers Go to Vietnam	385
18	The Historian and the "Gay Beret"	435
19	The Minority Myth: Blacks in Vietnam	452
20	Baby, You Looked Like the Cong: Women and Vietnam	466
21	Bogus Guests at the Hanoi Hilton	494

PART IV. VICTIMS AND HEROES

22	The Myth of Agent Orange	525
23	The VVA: Vietnam Victims of America	553
24	America's Wailing Wall	580

APPENDICES

	<i>Appendix I: Medal of Honor, Vietnam</i>	597
	<i>Appendix II: Distinguished Service Cross, Vietnam</i>	600
	<i>Appendix III: Navy Cross, Vietnam</i>	608
	<i>Appendix IV: Air Force Cross, Vietnam</i>	612
	<i>Appendix V: U.S. Military POWs, Vietnam (returned alive)</i>	614
	Endnotes	621
	Index	675

equated the role of Mafia foot soldier—a participant in racketeering, drug-dealing, and murder—with heroic Vietnam service, and nobody thought this was inconsistent.

Vietnam Goes to College

One of the most prominent speakers at a conference at Texas Tech University on the Vietnam War in 1996 was Dr. Larry E. Cable, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. Cable, who has written a handful of books on counterinsurgency, was an eccentric figure in jeans, sweatshirt, Indian turquoise jewelry, with a flowing mane of brown hair that reached his waist.

Despite his unusual appearance, more new-age hippie than military spit-and-polish, his reputation as an expert on counterinsurgency was impeccable. For years, Cable has lectured on covert operations at some of the most prestigious military institutions in the country—West Point, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the Marine Corps Command and Staff School at Quantico, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. Cable had been chosen Lecturer of the Year by both U.S. Air Force and the Marine Corps schools and is featured in the official publication of the Army's Special Forces at Fort Bragg.

Although a Ph.D., Cable's expertise drew on his own experiences in the Vietnam War. In fact, Cable's status as a Vietnam covert operative gave him vital credibility when he began to publish his theories on counterinsurgency. Indeed, Cable presented himself as a sort of super spook. He claimed that during a tour of duty as a Marine in 1965–66, he advised the "Quang Ngai Special Platoon," which he described as a CIA-backed paramilitary force, and later the Quang Ngai Provincial Reconnaissance Units, (PRUs). He was not only effective but also was an honorable leader. Cable boasted that the South Vietnamese units with which *he* worked "never engaged in any abuses of the population because he led them directly and prevented the abuses," unlike other American advisors who were ineffective and whose forces committed atrocities.⁶⁹³

But Cable's stories conflicted with accounts of many other PRU advisors. Bob Wall, the CIA officer in charge of paramilitary programs in Quang Ngai during 1966, and Rudy Enders, the CIA's senior advisor in I Corps from 1966 to 1969, both said they had never heard of Cable and that there was no such unit as the "Quang Ngai Special Platoon."

I could find no record that Larry E. Cable ever served in Vietnam, the Marines, or in any branch of the U.S. military. Authorities at Shimer College in Illinois, where Cable claimed to have earned an undergraduate degree, said he dropped out his sophomore year and did not return to graduate.⁶⁹⁴ Aware that Cable often lectured at many military schools, I contacted the

U.S. Air Force Special Operations School at Hurlburt Field, Florida, and alerted them about his misrepresentations. Authorities there investigated my charges and confronted Cable, who declined to provide documentation of his Marine Corps service. The professor was removed from the list of lecturers. Officials at the Marine Corps Command and Staff School heard about Cable's expulsion from the Air Force school and contacted me. They undertook their own investigation and determined Cable had not served in the Marine Corps. Confronted, Cable again refused to provide proof of his service. He no longer lectures at the Command and Staff School.

I sent my information about Cable to Dr. James Leutze, Chancellor at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. I did not receive a reply. Cable, however, abruptly announced his resignation.⁶⁹⁵

In 1991, *60 Minutes* aired a segment called "Vietnam 101," about a class in the religion department of the University of California at Santa Barbara. The class had grown from a handful of students in 1979 to the most popular course not only on campus but also possibly the most heavily attended college class in America, with as many as fifteen hundred students each semester signing up.⁶⁹⁶

Presented by a religion professor named Walter Capps, the course featured the history of the war in Vietnam as presented by individuals who had been there. "Healing"—of the veterans, of a generation, of the entire country—is a common theme. Often the stories are so emotional, the speakers so overwhelmed by their memories, the class seems to be like an eight-hundred-member encounter group, with everyone in tears.

The lecturers have included everybody from Sen. Robert Kerrey, Medal of Honor recipient, to B.T. Collins, the Green Beret who headed the effort to build a California Vietnam veterans' memorial. But a virtual legion of average soldiers and airmen tromped through Capps' classroom to tell their stories to nineteen and twenty-year-olds who know little about Vietnam beyond what they had seen in the movies *Platoon* or *First Blood*.

Some of the speakers' stories seemed so crazy—emphasizing atrocities and amazing heroics—that I suspected many of the presenters were not Vietnam veterans at all. In 1990, I called Professor Capps, and he readily admitted that on a couple of occasions he had heard that some of the stories might not be accurate. He personally had never checked his speakers' military records. But Capps assured me that all of those he allowed to speak came to him with good referrals.

In 1994, a member of the Special Forces Association, an unofficial historian of the Special Forces, sent me a tape of former Green Beret Dan Gisel making a presentation to this class. Capps' class had grown in prestige to such an extent that the course was being shown on the National Educational Television Network and piped through cable systems in major

metropolitan areas around the country. The Special Forces veteran had heard of my interest in false history and wanted to point out another outrageously ludicrous story being foisted on naïve and impressionable college kids.

Like many others, Gisel had visited the class out of curiosity and then had signed up to attend. After that, he returned each year as a guest speaker.

Gisel's presentation began with a Vet Center employee reading a citation for the Distinguished Service Cross given to Green Beret Dan Gisel for heroism in Vietnam. In full Special Forces regalia—green beret, uniform, full-sized decorations including the DSC and Silver Star—Gisel took the lectern.

Dramatically, Gisel told how he and other members of Green Beret team A-342, along with nearly four hundred South Vietnamese troops and their families, were attacked on June 9, 1965, at a Special Forces base in the Central Highlands by more than fifteen hundred enemy soldiers. Assault after assault hit the camp. The firefight raged for fifteen hours. When his commanding officer was killed, Gisel assumed command.

Air strikes finally made it possible for helicopters to evacuate the survivors. The enemy had killed some two hundred Vietnamese troops and members of their families. Twenty Americans were killed or wounded—one of the highest losses Americans had suffered in a single day up to that point in the war.

Although he didn't say so outright, he was describing the infamous battle of Dong Xoai. As Gisel told of fellow Green Berets who died, leaving him one of the few survivors, he seemed to choke up, pausing as if fighting back tears. Hollywood casting agents would have been impressed. Capps certainly was. At the end of the tape, the professor came out and praised Gisel as a hero, thanking him for sharing his compelling story. The bookend comments by Capps and the Vet Center employee authenticated Gisel's tales.

"I just tell the kids how the thing evolved as the firefight continued, how I reacted to the fact of losing so many of my friends," Gisel told the *Dallas Morning News*, which ran a story about the course. "I remember more about it each time I tell the story. I guess that's just because I tried to put all that stuff out of my mind for so many years."⁶⁹⁷

This was really an easy one. In the aftermath of the battle of Dong Xoai, Americans were awarded two Medals of Honor and three DSCs. Gisel described a Lt. Williams who received the Medal of Honor. Lt. Charles Williams did, in fact, receive the Medal of Honor after Dong Xoai. But Gisel didn't receive the Distinguished Service Cross, as he claimed. He wasn't even there.

Gisel's military record indicated that at the time of the battle of Dong Xoai, Dan Morris Gisel was a military policeman in Japan. Not until almost a year later, in April 1966, did Gisel set foot in Vietnam—as an MP security guard at a large communications facility at Qui Nhon. Gisel received no valorous decorations nor was he a Green Beret.⁶⁹⁸ In other words, Gisel's story was a hoax.

Realizing from our first conversation that the professor didn't seem particularly concerned with the veracity of his participants, I didn't contact Capps. But when *20/20* came knocking on my door for stories about impostors, they gravitated to Gisel for two reasons: the outrageous nature of Gisel's lies, and because they had a full hour of pure cinematic prevarication on national television. The producers called Gisel at his home in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and asked if correspondent Tom Jarriel could interview him. Gisel readily agreed.

Before talking to Gisel, Jarriel interviewed Jim Taylor, a medic with the Green Berets that terrible day. "I knew every man on the team, and he wasn't there," Taylor said. "None of us ever heard of him." Taylor provided a picture of the twelve-man team.⁶⁹⁹

Jarriel skillfully led Gisel into a journalistic ambush. Gisel recounted his tales of heroism at Dong Xoai for an hour before Jarriel brought the hammer down. He showed him Taylor's picture of the real Green Beret team at Dong Xoai.

"Do you see your picture here?" Jarriel asked.

Gisel squinted and put on his glasses. There was a long, awkward silence.

"No, I do not," Gisel said.

"Can you explain your absence in this picture?" Jarriel asked.

"No, I cannot," said Gisel, breathing heavily and looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

The interview ended. As the two camera crews started packing their bags, Gisel's wife ran around the house, screaming at them. *How dare they impugn her husband's reputation!* Gisel just sat, as if in a state of shock. His lies were going to be exposed on national television.

Gisel had worn full-size military decorations in violation of federal law. I talked to agents from both the Justice Department and the FBI, but medals violations are not a high priority of an overworked judicial system. They declined to do anything.

When *20/20* rebroadcast the story in May 1995, the producer called Capps, who was later elected to Congress, and the university for a comment. They had only one thing to say: Gisel was no longer lecturing at UCSB.⁷⁰⁰

I'm not aware of any reprimand or any changes being made in screening

course participants. Gisel had been a linchpin of this class for a decade. My guess is that in the years since the course started, literally dozens of pretenders have presented bogus history of the Vietnam War to thousands of impressionable college students. These liars will go on telling their fables. And young adults will go on believing that they heard the truth about the war.

But two well-known writers—Randy Shilts and Shelby Stanton—have reached far more people than all those in Capps' classes over the years combined. Both have distorted history in different ways. One to promote a political agenda and the other to promote himself.

- 679 John B. Dwyer, "Arsenal," *Vietnam*, October 1994, pp. 12, 16, 57.
- 680 Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, p. 207.
- 681 F. C. Brown, "Limited Sources: The Phoenix Program," Review, *Foreign Intelligence Literary Scene*, pp. 9-10.
- 682 Postcard to F. C. Brown, from Doug Valentine, July 23, 1993.
- 683 Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1990).
- 684 *Fact Sheet* on Scott Barnes, National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, Washington, D.C., July 15, 1988.
- 685 Scott Barnes with Melva Libb, *BOHICA: A True Account of One Man's Battle to Expose the Most Heinous Cover-Up of the Vietnam Saga!* (Canton, Ohio: BOHICA Corporation, 1987).
- 686 *BOHICA: The Facts Behind the Fantasies of the Author, Scott Barnes*, A Research Paper Published by the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, Washington, D.C., 1988.
- 687 Military record of Scott Tracy Barnes, National Personnel Records Center, FOIA request by B. G. Burkett, January 2, 1990.
- 688 Letter from Col. Joseph A. Schlatter to the National League of Families, July 26, 1988.
- 689 Gene Mustain and Jerry Capeci, *Murder Machine: A True Story of Murder, Madness, and the Mafia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
- 690 Edward F. Murphy, *Dak To* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1993), pp. 233-321.
- 691 173rd LRRP, 74th LRP, N/75 Ranger Alpha Roster: 75th Ranger Regiment.
- 692 Interview of Gene Mustain by Glenna Whitley.
- 693 Mark Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* (Naval Institute, 1997). I had researched Cable and had determined that his military career was fabricated. When author Mark Moyer contacted me about the impostor Yoshia Chee, we also swapped information on Cable. Moyer later interviewed Cable for his book on the Phoenix Program.
- 694 Letter of May 17, 1996. "Dear Mr. Burkett: As I informed you on the telephone Wednesday, Larry E. Cable did not graduate from Shimer College. Our records show that he attended from the Fall 1960 semester until the Spring 1962 semester. Sincerely, Ian Crump, Associate Dean."
- 695 Letter from B. G. Burkett to Dr. James R. Leutze Chancellor, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, dated October 9, 1997.
- 696 Transcript, Volume XXIII, Number 37, "Vietnam 101," *60 Minutes*, CBS, May 26, 1991. First aired October 4, 1987.
- 697 Ken Stephens, "New Look at the '60s," *The Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 1988, p. A-1.
- 698 Military record of Dan Morris Gisel, National Personnel Records Center, FOIA request by B. G. Burkett, May 25, 1994.
- 699 Letter from William M. Stokes, III, Colonel, USA (Ret.), to B. G. Burkett, July 19, 1994. James T. Taylor, Jr., 5th Sp. Forces Gp., was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions at Doug Xoai. (US Army/Vietnam, General Order 737/1967.)
- 700 Walter Capps died in October 1997 at Dulles International Airport of a heart attack.

Chapter Eighteen: The Military Historian and the "Gay Beret"

- 701 Shelby Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, *U.S. News*, 1981. His other Vietnam history books include: *Green Berets at War*, Presidio Press, 1985, the story of Special Forces in