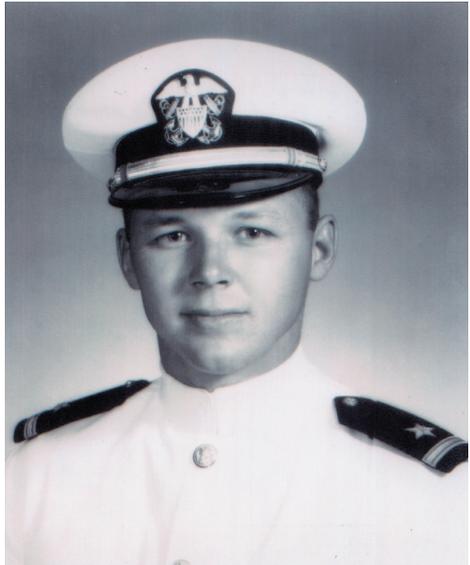


Waging Peace

Fr. Roy Bourgeois, MM

Roy Bourgeois spent four years in the military—two years aboard ship, one year in Greece, and one year on shore duty in Vietnam as a Navy lieutenant. He is a recipient of the Purple Heart. After leaving the military he became a Catholic priest and worked in Latin America for six years. He is the founder of SOA Watch, a grassroots organization dedicated to closing the School of the Americas.

Growing up in a small town in the bayous of Louisiana, I was taught to be patriotic. When I left college with a degree in geology, and our country's leaders told us we had to go off to Vietnam and stop the spread of communism, I did not question them. I became a naval officer, spent a couple of years aboard ship, and then volunteered for shore duty in Vietnam.



Young Roy Bourgeois as a naval officer in the 1960s.

Vietnam became a turning point in my life. We soldiers were young and in a country far from home, knowing so little about its people, culture, and history. We were warriors, believing our cause was noble. Then something happened. The suffering and death and the body bags coming back home began to change us. We started questioning our country's violence as a dead-end street. At the time I could not articulate it, but I was beginning to feel what Dr. Martin Luther King was saying: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy." Hope, which was always very alive in my life, began to disintegrate in Vietnam.

But grace was at work. I met a missionary at a nearby orphanage who was caring for hundreds of children, many of them wounded by our bullets and napalm. In the midst of all the madness and

violence—he was a peacemaker, a healer. Spending time with the children helped get me through my year in Vietnam, helped me hold on to hope.

I returned home to my family and friends, very grateful to be alive. But I came back, as so many of us did, different. I entered a seminary of the Maryknoll Order, a group serving the poor in 28 countries. After being ordained a Catholic priest in 1972, I went to Bolivia, where a slum on the outskirts of La Paz became my home for the next five years. There the poor began to teach me about U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

Bolivia was struggling under a brutal dictator, General Hugo Banzer, who came to power through a violent coup that was supported by the United States. During this time, the United States was also supporting the repressive militaries of Chile, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua—arming and training the men with the guns who were at war with the poor.

Bolivia's poor taught me about the human condition of suffering. The majority of the people don't receive a just wage for their labor—and they struggle for survival. They live in shacks without running water. They don't have schools for their children, and when they get sick there are no medicines to heal them. In short, the poor of Latin America die before their time. They are hungry for food—and they are hungry for justice.

In their struggle for survival, the poor and oppressed become educated. They begin to see the causal relationship between their poverty and the wealth of the United States. They know that there are more than enough resources in their countries for everyone to live comfortably. But what is there to be shared instead has ended up in the hands of small, powerful elites.

The suffering poor of Latin America are doing what we would do if we lived in such dehumanizing poverty day after day. They are saying, "Basta!" (Enough!) They are organizing and calling for a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources. However, when the poor organize and speak out, the men with the guns are there to silence them; the soldiers defend that socioeconomic system exploiting the poor. It angered me to see my country giving guns and training to the bullies doing the killing. It was all about providing the muscle to protect U.S. economic interests in Latin America—at any cost to the Latin Americans.

The prisons of Bolivia began to overflow with tin miners, factory workers, and university students. With the help of the local bishop, I was able to get a pass and visit political prisoners. Many were being tortured, which I reported to members of Congress in the United States. I was later arrested and forced to leave Bolivia.

Back in the United States, I became very involved in El Salvador after Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated and four U.S. churchwomen were raped and killed by the Salvadoran military. (Two of those women were friends of mine.) I went to El Salvador and, as in Bolivia, I found my country giving guns and training to those doing the killing.

When hundreds of Salvadoran soldiers started combat training at Fort Benning, Georgia, I rented an apartment near the post, called it “Casa Romero,” and started organizing. After I gave talks at local colleges and churches about the U.S.-sponsored repression in El Salvador, it was time to take the message to those soldiers at Fort Benning. Linda Ventimiglia, who was in the Army Reserves and had trained at Fort Benning; Fr. Larry Rosebaugh, an Oblate priest who had worked in Brazil; and I were the messengers.

We dressed as high-ranking military officers and entered Fort Benning at night. We carried a powerful boom box that contained the last sermon of Archbishop Romero, given at the cathedral the day before he was assassinated. His sermon had called for the military to stop the killing. Linda, Larry, and I climbed a pine tree near the barracks of the Salvadoran soldiers and waited. When the lights went out, we boomed Romero’s message to the soldiers—and it was like poking a bee hive. We were arrested, brought to trial, and sent to prison for 18 months. But the truth could not be silenced, and we spoke from prison.

The bloodshed continued in El Salvador. On November 16, 1989, six Jesuit priests, their co-worker, and her 15-year-old daughter were massacred. A U.S. Congressional task force investigated and reported that those responsible were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) at Fort Benning.

I returned to Fort Benning and, just outside the main gate, rented a small apartment and began the SOA Watch. Joined by Kathy Kelly, Charlie Liteky, Jim Barnett, and others, we camped at the main gate and went on a water-only fast for 35 days. After the fast we started our research. Through the Freedom of Infor-

mation Act and human rights reports, we documented hundreds of SOA graduates involved in massacres, torture, and rape.

As word about this school of assassins (all paid for by U.S. taxpayers) began to spread around the country, a movement was born—a grass-roots movement rooted in nonviolence and connected in solidarity with the suffering poor of Latin America. It grew rapidly and became very diverse—made up of thousands of college students, parents, grandparents, veterans, religious, and others. We worked hard at educating and lobbying our senators and representatives.

A growing number of members of Congress called for the School's closure when it was learned that SOA manuals advocated torture. The Pentagon, realizing the days of their school were numbered, came up with a plan of changing its name. By a close vote in Congress, SOA became the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC) on January 17, 2001.



No one was fooled. It was a new name, but the same shame. The late Rep. Joe Moakley of Massachusetts was right when he said that re-naming the school was like pouring a bottle of perfume on a toxic waste dump. The school is still deadly. It's still about men with guns, still about keeping the militaries of Latin America in power to protect U.S. corporations and sweat shops, and still about allowing the privileged to live very well off the backs of the poor.

Standing vigil, June 2000, US Courthouse, Columbus, GA

After the September 11 attacks, the commanding officer of Fort Benning and the mayor of adjacent Columbus said that the U.S. was at war with terrorists, and they requested that the SOA Watch call off its annual protest in front of Fort Benning. But the tens of thousands in the movement said that it was more important than ever to protest. After all, President Bush has repeatedly said that we are at war with terrorism, and should go after those training camps for terrorists wherever they are. A good place to start is on our own soil at the SOA/WHISC.

So on November 17-18, 2001, over 10,000 from all over the country gathered at Fort Benning's main gate and said, "Not in our name!"

We remembered those killed in the September 11 attacks, the 75,000 killed in El Salvador, the 200,000 killed in Guatemala, and the thousands who continue to die in Colombia at the hands of a military armed and trained by the United States.

More than 100 were arrested at the November protest and some likely will be going to federal prisons. They will join more than 70 prisoners of conscience in the SOA Watch movement who have served time. Prison is difficult, but whenever the government sends us there, the movement is energized and grows.

Our country produces and sells more weapons than any other nation. The U.S. possesses more weapons than ever before. Yet we have never felt less secure than we do today. The word “idolatry” best expresses what this is all about—the putting of one’s trust in false gods.

After many years I returned to Vietnam this past summer. I felt it was important to go back to the place that had had such an impact on my life. I brought with me a letter that said, “As a Vietnam veteran I have returned to your country to apologize for all the suffering and death we caused you. Over these years I have asked God’s forgiveness for what we did in Vietnam. I now ask for yours.”



One of the many Vietnamese to whom I gave my letter was a Buddhist monk. In our long conversation he said, “Our greatest enemy is ignorance. Our sword must be wisdom.”

In light of terrorism and the macho talk of our president, and in light of SOA/WHISC and U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, I think about the monk’s words a lot today.

RB

Fr. Bourgeois leads funeral procession at Ft. Benning, Nov. 18, 2001. Photo by Liz Quirin, *The Messenger*