

For a Mother Who Lost Five Sons in El Salvador

Lil Corrigan (writing for herself and Bill Corrigan)

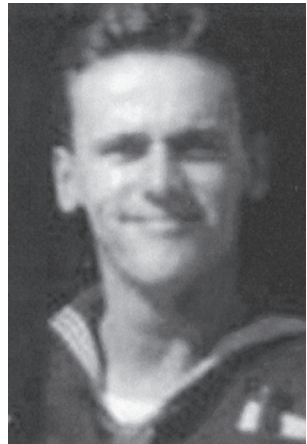
William James (Bill) Corrigan was born in 1920 and grew up in Rhode Island. He joined the Navy several years after high school, in 1942. His service included Flight Training at Pensacola, Florida and Aviation Radio at the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Millington, Tennessee. He was also stationed at Banana River, Florida and San Diego, California.

Lillian Kamack Corrigan was born in 1923 in Connecticut; she moved to Atlanta, Georgia when she was 12 years old. After Catholic high school and business school, she joined the Navy WAVES at age 20. She met Bill at Radio School in Millington, Tennessee—where she worked in the code room. They married while both were stationed in Florida.

After the war, they raised four children in Atlanta. Bill attended Emory University, graduating in Political Science. He then worked for Lockheed as an engineer. That position took the Corrigans to Iran from 1976 to 1979, when Khomeini came to power. When not raising their children, Lil has spent a lot of time volunteering—both with handicapped children in Iran and disadvantaged children in the U.S. But both Lil and Bill have been steadfast social activists—and that activism included a 2-month prison witness by Bill (although arguably Lil served it as well!).

We, Bill and Lil, are part of the so-called “Greatest Generation.” The phrase tends to romanticize World War II and denotes a sense of moral goodness, but war is neither good nor moral. It is dirty, mean, painful, and lonesome. Yet we both went off as young people do—patriotic, idealistic Americans to serve in a war we both believed in.

We met in the Navy in Aviation Radio School; courted at Memphis, Jacksonville, and Banana River (now Cape Canaveral); and were married in St. Edward’s Catholic Chapel at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. As we walked back from the



Bill Corrigan early in his Navy career

altar, we looked up and noticed German prisoners-of-war sweeping the choir loft after our 8:00 am Mass.



Lillian Kamack as a Navy WAVE

War becomes a defining moment in one's life. Looking back, we think not only of our own experiences, but of all those friends and relatives who were deeply affected, physically and mentally, by that war. No one comes back from war unchanged. However, everyone wants to put "his war" behind him. And so like many other veterans at that time, Bill came home to Georgia to get his college education under the GI Bill, while I settled into marriage and raising the growing family. We knew everything was beautiful and that we would be the perfect family.

Things didn't go quite so smoothly, not in the family nor in society. The South was in turmoil. Black people were rising up to demand their civil rights. This was a time of much soul-searching for us. We were very affected by Vatican II (convened by Pope John XXIII), and the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

We became active locally, and our realization of the unjust social conditions experienced by the poor deepened. The assassination of Dr. King moved us deeply, and I became very involved with the Poor People's Campaign (which Dr. King had been organizing when he was killed) in Atlanta and Macon, Georgia. Eventually I went to Washington, DC for Solidarity Day; Bill stayed home with the kids.

In the 1980s we became increasingly involved with the peace movement, and especially followed the events taking place in Latin America. In a letter to Senator Sam Nunn dated February 27, 1981, shortly after the assassination of Archbishop Romero, I wrote: "...This administration has said it intends to downplay 'human rights' and to concentrate on 'terrorism.' How foolish is that talk, when the abuse of human rights is terrorism. Though the rape and killing of four American women (three of them nuns) in El Salvador was an act of the greatest terrorism, the administration has been strangely silent...." That statement in '81 on terrorism seems rather prophetic today.

Bill and I participated in several trips to Central America in the '80s. We saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears what U.S.-sponsored war was doing to the innocent and poor people of those countries. We witnessed not only war against the poor, but war against "Liberation Theology." We returned home committed to working for social justice. We saw the repression in Latin America as yet more oppression of people of color, as well as their churches.

In early 1990 I wrote a letter to Congressman Joe Moakley, who had recently led a Congressional investigative committee to El Salvador. After thanking Mr. Moakley (our beloved, late Congressperson) for his commitment to discerning the truth about the horrendous killing of the Jesuit priests in November 1989, I encouraged him to get a copy of the "Santa Fe Document." That document had influenced policy during the Reagan years, as well as Nelson Rockefeller's opinion that the decision of the Latin American Catholic Bishops at Medellín—namely, to exercise a "preferential option for the poor," what is known as Liberation Theology—was "not in the interest of the United States."

Obviously the SOA/WHISC still thinks Liberation Theology is "not in the interest of the United States," for as late as 1998 (and it's probably still in use) a [telling] paper was distributed by the SOA's Public Relations Department to visitors. In answer to the question, "Why the controversy over the School?" it says in part, "Many of the critics supported Marxism-Liberation Theology in Latin America...." That thinking in the 1980s led easily to the message painted on many walls in San Salvador: "Be a patriot, kill a priest."

When Bill and I heard that Fr. Roy Bourgeois and some folks we knew were conducting a lengthy fast at the main gate of Fort Benning in 1990, we decided to join them for a few days. We learned of the largely unknown School of the Americas and its training of the Salvadoran military (including the soldiers who had killed those Salvadoran Jesuits in 1989). We have continued our presence at the gate every November since then, and our knowledge of the atrocities committed by the graduates of the School has grown considerably.

In 1995 Bill was arrested at Fort Benning for his participation in the re-enactment of the killing of the Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter. It was amazing how this small group of witnesses came together from all over the country—not knowing one another, but mutually committed to being a voice for justice. They became known as the SOA-13. Bill went to prison for two months, a first-time offender at age 76. During the trial he told Judge Elliott:

“I enjoy a responsibility as a citizen of this country, and [further I want] to show an example to my three sons who are here and my grandchildren, that if something is wrong you must do what you can to set it straight.”

He continued: “When my wife and I went to El Salvador in ’87, we went to a church and there was a lady weeping about the death of her five sons. They had all been killed by the military. She was saying in Spanish to us that she wanted us to become ambassadors of peace and go back to America and try to stop what was going on. It was very emotional.” Bill felt obligated to go onto the property of Fort Benning as her ambassador.



Lil and Bill Corrigan participate in an annual November gathering at Ft. Benning.

Bill and I saw many of our constitutional laws broken during this sad period in Central America. We learned from an article in *The Atlanta Constitution* of 5,000 U.S. forces who fought secretly and illegally alongside the Salvadoran military. Some of those Americans died and were honored in a service at Arlington Cemetery in 1996. The article said in part: “Reports of firefights involving U.S. troops were kept secret, and field commanders were told in no uncertain terms not to nominate soldiers for combat awards.” I wrote a letter in response, published in *The Constitution* and titled “Political Tragedy”: “The enemies targeted under this ‘heroic’ policy are an archbishop, six Jesuit priests, and the entire unarmed village of El Mozote. As the awards were passed out, were some saved for the four American churchwomen who were raped and murdered by Salvadoran (and maybe U.S.) military?”

Sadly, Bill and I remember too well the terrorist hoses, dogs, and clubs used on nonviolent people of color in the ’50s and ’60s in America. Sadly, we remember protesting the illegal terrorist *contra* army, which was inflicted by the U.S. government on Nicaragua. Sadly, we learned of the litany of death squad killings and human rights violations in El Salvador that were the result of terrorist training at the SOA/WHISC.

On September 11, 2001, our own country was devastated by mind-boggling terrorism. Our hearts have been broken, and our grief for those who died is great. Unfortunately our government reacted immediately with military retaliation—leaving no opportunity for thoughtful, nonviolent options for justice. We continually fail to see the history of violence that the U.S. has inflicted on other countries.

Martin Luther King, our greatest American prophet, said: “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.” In his famous speech “Beyond Vietnam,” he spoke of confusing dissent with disloyalty; he called America “strange liberators”; he said America was on the “wrong side of world revolutions”; he called us to a “radical revolution of values”; he called “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today... my own country.” But he also called for us to “Come home, America”—and he had a dream for America.

Like Martin Luther King, Bill and I have a dream. We dream of a moral America that will hold every country and all suffering people “in our national interest.”

We dream of a generous, caring America capable of exporting our highest democratic values, freedom, and human rights for all people.

We dream of a self-critical America, a truthful America that can acknowledge its complicity in crimes against humanity—with this honesty then leading us to repentance and reconciliation. We dream that SOA/WHISC will begin this process.

Then Bill and I can stand proudly as part of the “Greatest Generation.”

LC

Bill Corrigan died on February 25, 2005, in Marietta, GA. He was 84. Beginning in early 2003, he protested weekly in the Marietta Square against the war in Iraq. When he became too weak to stand at the Marietta protest, he would sit on a park bench with his sign, “Support the troops, not the policy.”

Bill Corrigan, Presente!