

Naming Reality

Bill McNulty

Bill McNulty resides in Setauket, on Long Island, New York. He is 70 and has been married to Carol for 50 years, and they have six children and four grandchildren. He was an officer in the U.S. Army Artillery, and was connected to the military for 16 years, including schooling and active duty. He worked in insurance, taught school for 14 years, and retired as a carpenter.

Bill has been working to close the SOA since 1991, when he met Roy Bourgeois. He served six months in federal prison in 1998 as one of the SOA-25, for acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. He also works with the St. James Peace and Justice Community, the South Country Peace Group, and Pax Christi Long Island, and he has a weekly radio program devoted to political commentary on WUSB 90.1 FM (Stony Brook University).

Being a veteran suggests conformity with conventional wisdom. I am currently in a different place, but it took time to get there. May I tell you some of my story ?

My military career (or maybe better said, my military exposure) spanned 16 years. After eight years in a Catholic elementary school, I went to St. Francis Xavier Military High School in New York City. I then went to Fordham College and was part of the ROTC program. Upon graduation in 1956, I was commissioned a second lieutenant and sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. After active duty, I remained connected to the active reserve until honorable discharge in 1964.



Bill McNulty was a student at St. Francis Xavier Military High School.

Never during these years did I give serious thought to the fact that the training I was receiving might bring me to kill someone or be killed myself. That's the way we were in the 1950s. The connection between my Church and the military was strong. No one questioned authority. Obedience, duty, and responsibility were woven together into a comfortable blanket of acceptance. Only once did reality briefly enter the picture, when in 1958 I received a notice to prepare to go to Lebanon. Nothing ever came of that.

I remained fixed in those beliefs. There was personal sympathy for those going to Vietnam, but no understanding of what was going on there. After all, a person well protected from knowledge of an emerging civil rights struggle would be unlikely to know much about Indochina. Riots in the streets, I thought, must be the work of communists and other un-American types. Nixon would restore order.

Central America was the next mystery for me. With no knowledge of that region and six children to raise, still nothing penetrated my psyche. During the *contra* war in Nicaragua, I do remember saying to my wife, "I don't know what's going on down there, but I am sure we are protecting someone's money."

Reagan's raid on Libya, for reasons that later became suspect, jarred my complacency. Then came the invasion of Grenada. That was the first time I witnessed and fully comprehended the use of an openly controlled press. Reporters were allowed on the island only after the fighting ended, and even then were accompanied by a Pentagon handler. Later, the stated provocation for this invasion (namely, the building of an airfield with a long runway by the Russians), turned out to be a lie. The airfield was known to be a commercial one being built by Canada.

The U.S. intervention in Panama was next, in 1989. Our former ally there, Noriega, was a known drug dealer. An invasion designed to remove Noriega took place, and this time the target was the poorest part of Panama City. Some four or five thousand people were killed. (The bodies disappeared before anyone could count them.) The new president of Panama was soon involved in the drug trade as heavily, if not more so, than Noriega had been. Consequently, the rationale for this military foray also became suspect to me.

Significantly, Noriega was tried and convicted in a trial whose focus was so restricted that no evidence of the illegal *contra* war was admissible. The *contras* were a construct of the United States formed in

response to the successful Nicaraguan revolution. The *contras*' activities were funded by illegal international arms sales here in the United States, which effectively circumvented Congressional restrictions. Noriega had ceased to be cooperative and had to be silenced by forced removal from office and incarceration.

Only a few short months later I began to hear of Iraq. Its leader, Saddam Hussein, a former U.S. ally, sought advice from our ambassador to his country. When asked if the U.S. would have any problems with his reclaiming a part of his country (partitioned away by the British many years before), April Glaspie responded that her country would view this as an internal matter between Arab states. The outcome of what came to be called Desert Storm, in addition to reversing the invasion of Kuwait, guaranteed that the capital gains from their oil sales continued to flow through the banks of Britain and the U.S. Further, the war was the means used to remove arms from Iraq, which we had previously sold to them.

In fact, the Gulf War was the defining moment for me. This change in perception led me to many places: Griffith Air Base in Utica, New York; the Bath Iron Works in Bath, Maine; the trials of peace activists in Norfolk, Virginia and Elizabeth City, North Carolina; the Intrepid War Museum in New York City; Haiti; the Trident submarine manufacturing center in Groton, Connecticut; and churches and schools and all sorts of places where I could learn, listen, and speak.

It brought me into contact with many people: I met, spoke to, and spent time with John Schuchardt; Daniel Ellsberg; Father Daniel Berrigan; [the late] Philip Berrigan and his wife Liz McAlister; David Dellinger; Father Bill Brisotti; a host of people in Colrairie, Massachusetts, who are involved in war tax resistance and land trust living; and Catholic Worker folks from all over the country.

As I searched for some way to actively participate in the world I was beginning to see with opened eyes, I began writing to people who were in prison for acts of resistance. Taking that step appealed to me at that time. It was non-threatening but yet a step. One day I received the name of a Catholic priest serving time in a federal prison in Tallahassee, Florida. "What's a Catholic priest doing in jail?" I thought. His name was Roy Bourgeois. I wrote and he answered. In his response he made reference to the School of the Americas (SOA). Over the years as I have reflected on this incident, I have thought that if I hadn't written that letter, by now I'd be running a bingo—but instead I became involved with Father Roy and ended up in prison.

I invited Father Roy to come to Long Island upon his release from jail. Several of us organized a tour of some 27 different speaking locations on Long Island. I was his chauffeur and as a result heard his talk 27 times. I watched people's faces as he reached the point in his story where he would say, "This one's for you, brother." He was recounting the words he had spoken one night from the top of a pine tree outside the SOA barracks, just before playing a tape of Archbishop Romero's final homily to the Salvadoran soldiers resting there. "Final homily" because Romero was murdered at Mass the day after giving it in San Salvador — having appealed to the soldiers to stop killing their people. All of us were inspired and deeply touched.

From then on, SOA became a main issue for me and for many others in the Long Island / Metropolitan New York area. I recognized the issue as one through which people could be introduced to the larger related issues of economic disparity, militarism, domination, and violence. People could reach new perspectives, as far as they were ready to go, always returning to the main objective of closing the SOA.

When talking with other veterans, in order to establish common ground, I frequently say that the SOA doesn't represent any military they have been part of. However, a dialogue, once established, may bring out some similarities. During one such exchange with arresting MPs at Fort Benning, some admitted that they knew they were part of an empire, even acknowledging it to be a failing one.

On another occasion, during an SOA Watch (SOAW) fast on the Capitol steps, I encountered a major from the SOA. I expressed admiration for his courage in doing his surveillance work alone. I was with 200 friends, so I felt secure. He said, "That's why we do what we do, so you can be free to protest." I answered, "With all due respect, that's what they tell you is the reason. Do you know of Smedley Butler?" When I told him that Butler, a retired Marine Major General, in retrospect saw his whole career as one serving the protection of money, the major said, "I never heard that before," and walked away.

The reality of why we do what we do around the world is in that story, but cannot be made clearer than it is in the promotional material provided by the U.S. Space Command. They say, openly and repeatedly, that we must dominate space militarily to protect U.S. interests and investments. Smedley must be turning in his grave.

But we resisters keep trying. Positive things happen. There are other stories I could tell, but one in particular stands out. At a recent

Memorial Day parade, where a group of us had a presence in the line of march, I engaged a Vietnam veteran. He had seen my Veterans for Peace hat. I introduced myself, and he said, "I know that name. You were in prison and I read about it in the newspaper." He called his young son, a Boy Scout, out of the line of march, saying, "I want you to meet a man of courage and conviction." I said, "Son, your father is a man of courage," and with that asked the father if he would like to join us. "Not yet," he answered.

As the parade swung out onto the street, I heard a loud call, "Bill !" There was the father saluting me. I gave him an eyes left and a very enthusiastic salute in return. At the cemetery later, as we were listening to the tributes and waiting for our turn to honor the deceased, the father and son came to stand beside me.

The human spirit resists the efforts and actions of cynical and misguided leaders who tell us whom to hate. These same leaders continue to endorse measures and policies based on greed, power, and violence. But people can be helped to see past this. SOAW consistently and skillfully gives us the chance to aid this process of gaining insight and dispelling myths. We will keep working to close the School, to make clear what it represents, to turn around the thinking of those authorities who—just this year at the November 2001 Fort Benning vigil—called the nonviolent ones misguided.

We must look closely at statements that represent conventional wisdom: for example, former NYC Mayor Giuliani saying "September 11 was an unprovoked attack on us"; or Senator Hillary Clinton saying, as she referred to the same event, "This was an attack on our way of life." Statements like this must be examined.

The ability to change gives hope. I continue to be impressed and motivated by Paulo Freire's saying: "The most revolutionary act is to name reality."

BMCN



Bill McNulty brings the memory of Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler to the solemn funeral procession at Fort Benning on Nov. 18, 2001. Photo by Liz Quirin, *The Messenger*

