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“Cutting Through the Fog of War”

Misconduct Forcing More Soldiers Out of Army

Associated Press

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WASHINGTON — The number of U.S. soldiers forced out of the Army because of crimes or misconduct has soared in the past several years as the military emerges from a decade of war that put a greater focus on battle competence than on character.

Data obtained by The Associated Press shows that the number of officers who left the Army due to misconduct more than tripled in the past three years. The number of enlisted soldiers forced out for drugs, alcohol, crimes and other misconduct shot up from about 5,600 in 2007, as the Iraq war peaked, to more than 11,000 last year.

The data reveals stark differences between the military services and underscores the strains that long, repeated deployments to the front lines have had on the Army's soldiers and their leaders.

It also reflects the Army's rapid growth in the middle part of the decade, and the decisions to relax standards a bit to bring in and retain tens of thousands of soldiers to fill the ranks as the Pentagon added troops in Iraq and continued the fight in Afghanistan.

The Army grew to a peak of about 570,000 soldiers during the height of the wars, and soldiers represented the bulk of the troops on the battlefields compared with the other services.

“I wouldn't say lack of character was tolerated in (war) theater, but the fact of the last 10 or 12 years of repeated deployments, of the high op-tempo — we might have lost focus on this issue,” Gen. Ray Odierno, the Army's top officer, told the AP last week. “Sometimes in the past we've overlooked character issues because of competence and commitment.”

His comments mirror concerns aired by Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, several times in recent months. The ethical lapses, Dempsey said, can be attributed in some ways to 10 years at war when the military failed to properly balance character and competence.

“It is not the war that has caused this,” Dempsey said. “It is the pace, and our failure to understand that at that pace, we were neglecting the tools that manage us as a profession over time.”

Over the past year, a series of high profile scandals — from sexual assault and damaging leadership to mistreatment of the enemy and unauthorized spending — has dogged the military, leading to broad ethics reviews and new personnel policies.

Those scandals included the demotion of Army Gen. William “Kip” Ward for lavish, unauthorized spending; sexual misconduct charges against Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Sinclair; and episodes of gambling and drinking by other general officers.

More recently, there have been cheating allegations against Air Force nuclear missile launch officers and a massive bribery case in California that has implicated six Navy officers. Examples of troop misconduct include Marines urinating on the corpses of Taliban fighters and soldiers posing with body parts of Afghan militants.

As a result, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and other leaders say ethics is a priority about which they now routinely lecture troops and officers. They also have undertaken initiatives aimed at identifying and dealing with problem service members.

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“We’re paying a lot more attention to it now. We are not tolerant at all of those showing a lack of character,” Odierno said. “We have to refocus ourselves so we get to where we think is the right place.”

In 2010, 119 Army officers were forced to leave the service because of misconduct; that number was fairly consistent with the annual totals since 2000. Last year the number was 387.

For enlisted soldiers, the numbers have seesawed over the past 13 years, hovering near 9,000 at the start of the decade and falling to 5,706 in 2007. Since then, the number has climbed again.

When the country needs a lot of troops on the front lines, more people with behavioral problems are allowed to come in and stay. When the military begins to shrink, commanders can be much more selective about who is kicked out and who is allowed to stay.

As the Army began to reduce its ranks in recent years toward a goal of 490,000 in 2015, leaders have been more willing and able to get rid of problem soldiers. That is likely to escalate because the latest plan would reduce the Army to 420,000 later in the decade if deep, automatic budget cuts continue.

The Navy went through a similar process.

When the decision was made to cut the size of the 370,000-strong naval force in 2004, the number of sailors who left due to misconduct and other behavior issues grew. In 2006, more than 8,400 sailors left due to conduct issues.

As the size of the Navy began to stabilize — it’s now at about 323,000 — the number of problem sailors leaving also began to decline steadily, dropping each successive year to a new low of about 3,700 in 2013.

In nearly one-third of the cases each year over that time period, the problems involved drug and alcohol use. More than 1,400 cases each year involved a “serious offense” or civil or criminal court case.

The Navy has become known as the most transparent service, often quicker to publicly fire commanders for misconduct or poor leadership. But the number of Navy officers forced out has remained relatively constant, ranging from 84 to 107 annually for the past eight years. The bulk of those were for what the service calls “unacceptable conduct” or unfitness for duty.

The Air Force, which is smaller than the Navy and Army, reported far fewer cases of airmen leaving for misconduct, both for officers and enlisted service members. The number of officers sepa-

rated from service since 2000 due to a court-martial ranged from a low of 20 in 2001 to a high of 68 in 2007. For enlisted airmen, the number ranged from a high of nearly 4,500 in 2002 to a low of almost 2,900 in 2013.

Data for the Marine Corp, the military’s smallest service, was not broken out by officers and enlisted personnel. Overall, it showed that Marines leaving the service due to misconduct was about 4,400 in 2007, but has declined to a bit more than 3,000 last year.

Those forced to leave for commission “of a serious offense” has nearly doubled from about 260 to more than 500 over the past seven years. The number of Marines who left after court-martial has dropped from more than 1,300 in 2007 to about 250 last year. The Marine Corps also grew in size during the peak war years, and is now reducing its ranks.

Across the services, leaders are trying to deal with complex questions about how to identify and correct the problems.

“I don’t think there is one simple answer to the issue of ethics, values, a lapse in some of those areas,” said Hagel during a recent briefing. “Was it a constant focus of 12 years on two long land wars, taking our emphasis off some of these other areas? I don’t know.”

He said he is appointing a top officer to work with the services on the problem, and he will be addressing the topic at regularly scheduled meetings with his military leaders.

The military services have been adding more lectures on ethics in their schools, and are also targeting top officers.

“We are talking to senior leaders about the consequences of power and how that changes somebody’s personality,” said Odierno. “Some don’t realize it’s happening to them.”

Lower-ranking service members are being asked to evaluate their higher-ranking superiors as part of the annual performance reviews. That process is slowly being expanded.

“As we conduct operations around the world we represent the United States with our moral and ethical values,” said Odierno. “We believe we should be held to a higher standard.”



The Menace of the Military Mind

by CHRIS HEDGES

I had my first experience with the U.S. military when I was a young reporter covering the civil war in El Salvador. We journalists were briefed at the American Embassy each week by a U.S. Army colonel who at the time headed the military group of U.S. advisers to the Salvadoran army. The reality of the war, which lasted from 1979 to 1992, bore little resemblance to the description regurgitated each week for consumption by the press. But what was most evident was not the blatant misinformation—this particular colonel had apparently learned to dissemble to the public during his multiple tours in Vietnam—but the hatred of the press by this man and most other senior officers in the U.S. military. When first told that he would have to meet the press once a week, the colonel reportedly protested against having to waste his time with those “limp-dicked communists.”

For the next 20 years I would go on from war zone to war zone as a foreign correspondent immersed in military culture. Repetitive rote learning and an insistence on blind obedience—similar to the approach used to train a dog—work on the battlefield. The military exerts nearly total control over the lives of its members. Its long-established hierarchy ensures that those who embrace the approved modes of behavior rise and those who do not are belittled, insulted and hazed. Many of the marks of civilian life are stripped away. Personal modes of dress, hairstyle, speech and behavior are heavily regulated. Individuality is physically and then psychologically crushed. Aggressiveness is rewarded. Compassion is demeaned. Violence is the favorite form of communication. These qualities are an asset in war; they are a disaster in civil society.

Homer in “The Iliad” showed his understanding of war. His heroes are not pleasant men. They are vain, imperial, filled with rage and violent. And Homer’s central character in “The Odyssey,” Odysseus, in his journey home from war must learn to shed his “hero’s heart,” to strip from himself the military attributes that served him in war but threaten to doom him off the battlefield. The qualities that serve us in war defeat us in peace.

Most institutions have a propensity to promote mediocrities, those whose primary strengths are knowing where power lies, being subservient and obsequious to the centers of power and never letting morality get in the way of one’s career. The military is the worst in this respect. In the military, whether at the Paris Island boot camp or West Point, you are trained not to think but to obey. What amazes me about the military is how stupid and bovine its senior officers are. Those with brains and the willingness to use them seem to be pushed out long before they can rise to the senior-officer ranks. The many Army generals I met over the years not only lacked the most rudimentary creativity and independence of thought but nearly always saw the press, as well as an informed public, as impinging on their

love of order, regimentation, unwavering obedience to authority and single-minded use of force to solve complex problems.

So when I heard James R. Clapper Jr., a retired Air Force lieutenant general and currently the federal government’s director of national intelligence, denounce Edward Snowden and his “accomplices”—meaning journalists such as Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras—before the Senate Intelligence Committee last week I was not surprised. Clapper charged, without offering any evidence, that the Snowden disclosures had caused “profound damage” and endangered American lives. And all who have aided Snowden are, it appears, guilty of treason in Clapper’s eyes.

Clapper and many others who have come out of the military discern no difference between terrorists and reporters, and by reporters I am not referring to the boot-licking courtiers on television and in Washington who masquerade as reporters. Carry out an interview with a member of al-Qaida, as I have, and you become in the eyes of generals like Clapper a member of al-Qaida. Most generals I know recognize no need for an independent press. The munchkins who dutifully sit through their press briefings or follow them around in preapproved press pools and publish their lies are the generals’ idea of journalism.

When I was in Central America the U.S. officers who were providing support to the military of El Salvador or Guatemala, along with help to the Contra forces then fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, did not distinguish between us journalists and the rebel forces or the leftist Sandinista government. We were one and the same. The reporters and photographers, often after a day or two of hiking to reach small villages, would report on massacres by the Salvadoran army, the Guatemalan army or the Contras. When the stories appeared, the U.S. officers usually would go volcanic.

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Next VFP56 meeting will be held
on Thursday, March 6th at
7:00 PM.
Meeting will be held in the
Commons Room at 550 Union
Street in Arcata.
Veterans and non-veterans are
more than welcome to come and
help us dialogue about what we to-
gether can do to bring about peace
in this complex world.



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But their rage would be directed not at those who pulled the triggers but at those who wrote about the mass killings or photographed the bodies.

This is why, after Barack Obama signed into law Section 1021 of the National Defense Authorization Act, which permits the U.S. military to seize U.S. citizens who “substantially support” al-Qaida, the Taliban or “associated forces,” to strip them of due process and to hold them indefinitely in military detention centers, I sued the president. I and my fellow plaintiffs won in U.S. District Court. When Obama appealed the ruling it was overturned. We are now trying to go to the Supreme Court. Section 1021 is a chilling reminder of what people like Clapper could do to destroy constitutional rights. They see no useful role for a free press, one that questions and challenges power, and are deeply hostile to its existence. I expect Clapper, if he has a free hand, to lock us up, just as the Egyptian military has arrested a number of Al-Jazeera journalists, including some Westerners, on terrorism-related charges. The military mind is amazingly uniform.

The U.S. military has won the ideological war. The nation sees human and social problems as military problems. To fight terrorists Americans have become terrorists. Peace is for the weak. War is for the strong. Hypermasculinity has triumphed over empathy. We Americans speak to the world exclusively in the language of force. And those who oversee our massive security and surveillance state seek to speak to us in the same demented language. All other viewpoints are to be shut out. “In the absence of contrasting views, the very highest form of propaganda warfare can be fought: the propaganda for a definition of reality within which only certain limited viewpoints are possible,” C. Wright Mills wrote. “What is being promulgated and reinforced is the military metaphysics—the cast of mind that defines international reality as basically military.”

This is why people like James Clapper and the bloated military and security and surveillance apparatus must not have unchecked power to conduct wholesale surveillance, to carry out extraordinary renditions and to imprison Americans indefinitely as terrorists. This is why the nation, as our political system remains mired in paralysis, must stop glorifying military values. In times of turmoil the military always seems to be a good alternative. It presents the facade of order. But order in the military, as the people of Egypt are now learning again, is akin to slavery. It is the order of a prison. And that is where Clapper and his fellow generals and intelligence chiefs would like to place any citizen who dares to question their unimpeded right to turn us all into mindless recruits. They have the power to make their demented dreams a reality. And it is our task to take this power from them.

Chris Hedges writes a regular column for Truthdig.com. Hedges graduated from Harvard Divinity School and was for nearly two decades a foreign correspondent for The New York Times. He is

the author of many books, including: *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*, *What Every Person Should Know About War*, and *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. His most recent book is *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*.

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VIETNAM From LIEUTENANT To REVOLUTIONARY

(The third installment of John Mulloy's book *The Journey of Forever*)

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A). The SIGNATURE

In retrospect, it was too ridiculously easy to take the oath of fealty to the U.S. government and its armed wing. I had already completed two years of basic instruction in a U.S. Army officer candidate's program. However, to partake of the two years of advanced level, it was required of one to actually enlist, which I did in September of 1965. This was demanded in order to keep you in the military, even if you dropped out of or were dismissed from the officer's course. So easy to give the required signature, the greased slide into the spiderweb of military life.

How did I get to this point? Was I 'nuts'? No, I view it as a web of circumstance woven by two strands of mutually supportive process. First, the state of U.S. socio-political consciousness at the time. Second, the overpowering family environment in which I was raised. The two overlapping pathways led inexorably to my being suctioned into the U.S. Army, in particular the quest to become a commissioned officer.

With total victory in the World War II struggle for empire, a U.S. based corporate/banking/military juggernaut became the dominant planetary economic power that it still is today. For the two decades after the war, which coincided with my first twenty years, only a few amongst the citizenry challenged the governmental, media, and educational version of political/historical events and patterns.

I remember that my California public high school education was considered 'advanced'. Unfortunately, history and government classes taught reverence for the study of only structure and process. Critical analysis of policies on the part of individuals was not encouraged. One should become a fully operative cog in the economic machine and not 'rock the boat'. Despite the so-called excellent education, a youth such as myself accepted foreign policy and war making as a governmental prerogative, not a citizen's concern.

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The 'Communist threat' was the bugaboo that secured the citizenry's quiet submission and abdication of responsibility. Kids like myself 'didn't have a clue'. We merely recited the Pledge of Allegiance and sang the Star Spangled Banner. The rising economic expectations of the rapidly increasing white middle class fueled fears of any return to a period of insecurity. So, the vox populi was stifled and closeted. I grew up within this rising middle strata, with goals of security and structured achievements.

On the family front, mine was of a military background. My father was career Army, doing liaison work with the Navy and Air Force. We lived on an incredible number of military bases, moving frequently. The vast majority of my dad's friends and associates were WWII /Korea vets. The military environment was honored within American society. Surrounded by these realities, it was expected by family and community that a young man like myself would 'serve'. To become an infantry officer, to lead men into battle, to do my country's bidding, was a high honor and glorious goal. I know it sounds bizarre, but that's the way it was in my youth.

My uncle Roger didn't help matters any. My mother's brother, he looked upon me as a surrogate son. An extreme right-winger, Roger was a major California law enforcement hard case who had prosecuted cases that ended on San Quentin's Death Row. He packed 'heat' 24/7. I thought it a natural part of life to go to a firing range with him, to learn all the capabilities of various pistols and rifles. This kind of firepower experience, along with exposure to such militarist attitudes, drove home my expectation to serve in the military. Nobody was there to suggest otherwise.

Let me tell a story about Roger that illustrates a key aspect of my surroundings during these teenage years. He was a leading member of the Minutemen, the armed wing of the John Birch Society. These guys were law enforcement/military types who were so 'out there' that they saw Richard Nixon as a 'Communist dupe'. They used their connections to steal weaponry from military armories, building up caches of war supplies at cabins in the Sierra-Nevada Mountains.

Christmas, 1965, I came home to visit mom. Entering a bedroom, I noticed a small corner of a rifle butt sticking out from under the bed. I wasn't shocked. I didn't have to guess what was there and who was responsible. By the time I had fished out everything from under the bed, I was facing a dozen M-14's. Opening the sliding door closet, I found two M-60 machine guns and a half dozen crates of ammunition. I called Roger and indicated that he was exposing his sister to danger. He came over and I helped him load up his truck. Still being fairly right wing at the time, I chastised him only for using mom's house as a stash, not for stealing the stuff. He could stockpile all he wanted as far as I was concerned.

So, that was my situation, in a nutshell, in 1965. There was no shock to my system as I gave up my signature and took my oath to serve my country's military needs with all my ability. My life had led to this event. Not once, from any source, did I receive any cautionary

advice or negative view of my actions. A friend of mine, reflecting on his time in Vietnam, describes all those young men touched by the military as having been drafted at birth and incubated for the purpose of war.

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B). REVELATION

During the winter of 1965-66, I was still defending the U.S. stance in Vietnam. The 'falling dominoes' theory still held value to me. That is, if we didn't stop the spread of communism in South Vietnam, then all of Southeast Asia was at risk. This had been gospel for years. But, I was reading extensively and talking with/listening to professors and students at Pomona College in Claremont, California. My soul was open.

Finally, one March day under blue, southern California skies, the psychological dam holding my foreign policy and war-making belief system gave way. I ran out of fingers to plug the dike. With a mighty rumble from within my SELFHOOD, my allegiance to the 'truth' sanctity of my government crumbled. "Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall and couldn't be put together again."

I remember that afternoon clearly. Sitting in a lounge chair, soaking in the Sun's rays and reading the latest copy of LIFE magazine, then a weekly, still influential in American society. A magazine that I'd been reading all my life. Mainstream to the max. There was an article on our buildup in Vietnam. Our construction industry, led by Bechtel Corp., would make a fortune building bases and port facilities to handle the influx of our military. Armament factories would employ huge numbers of workers in the good old U.S.A. Money, money, money – not one word about freedom, democracy, or the suffering of human beings. The dam burst and I realized that it was all about economics, control, power. Yes, EMPIRE.

The effect on my mind and soul was overwhelming. I did not cringe or feel fear. I steamed forward, trying to come to grips with what was happening to me. I realized with CLARITY that I was serving the American Empire, which was no better than the Roman Empire or the various European empires, in terms of exploitation and mass murder. My education was grounded in the history, politics, economics, and military exploits of western civilization. I was a soldier of the American Legions, just like the Roman Legions. Vietnam was Palestine. We were crucifying the Vietnamese, as the Romans did to Jesus and the people of the near East. It all poured out of the broken dam. The genie would never be put back in the bottle.

A single magazine article had been the tripwire, but obviously a lot of thought and study had led to this point. As the months rolled by, new insights and concepts would flesh out. To the casual observer, my surface personality would seem the same, but my mind and soul were going through great changes. I was coming to new

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understandings of what U.S. foreign policy and war making were in fact. I did not want to go backwards, but forward to new consciousness. I didn't know how it would work out. I knew I would not serve the Empire in Vietnam, that I would find solutions that would serve the cause of justice and truth, while not crushing my life. I did not seek out a lawyer or advice from friends or family. I kept it all within, trusting the guidance that would come from a Greater Consciousness than my own.

Radical analysis, expanding my knowledge base, would come with time and experience. I began to go to candlelight vigils and mild protests during the early years of the War, but nothing 'heavy'. I still went through the motions of my officer training. The lieutenant colonel and major in charge of my instruction thought I was "un-focused". They didn't have any concept of what was happening to me. "You've got all the tools. You'll be a fine platoon leader when you get over there." "Lucky me", I thought.

Keeping it all within myself would be my pattern for the coming years. I would deal with my situation one step at a time, remain flexible, make solid decisions about what to do next, implement them, and put the problem of my military involvement on the back burner, as much as possible. I never let the conundrum of my Army situation detract from experiencing new realities to the fullest extent and keeping my mind and soul in growth mode. In fact, by not letting the problem drag me down, my constantly gained knowledge brought new solutions with it. By careful study of your past experiences, combined with being completely 'in the moment', you can affect your future possibilities in ways that are natural to and sought by your soul, your sense of self.

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"When the POWER of LOVE Overcomes the Love of Power, the World will Know PEACE."

Jimi Hendrix, U.S. Army, 101st. Airborne.

Steve Norris is an activist in Asheville, N.C. who breeds humanitarianism and has a record of being his brothers' and sisters' keeper. I am honored to know him and I forward his report to all of you. John Spitzberg, Chapter 099, Past President and Host Chapter Coordinator of the 2014 Convention

DELIVERING WATER TO PRENTER HOLLER, WEST VIRGINIA

To my friends: I wrote this account of taking water to Prenter Holler in West Virginia. Please feel free to share it.
Steve Norris

This is a tough story to write about: the horror of contaminated water, the images of the the mining families' peoples' faces, the

children, the confederate flags, the beautiful mountains, the extreme gratitude of folks we gave water to - these are all so fresh that I can't take it all in. Add to this the fact that I have in the past gone to this area to protest against the way of life of these very poor but good-hearted people, and . . . Well. I guess I am getting ahead of myself.

Last Friday seven students and I from Asheville, NC took my pickup truck with the 210 gallon tank from the 2013 Walk full of water and three other cars loaded down with another with 250 gallons of water north to West Virginia. We also took with us the \$400 we had fundraised locally, and drove to Whitesville in Boone County West Virginia where RAMPS has its office in a rundown old storefront. RAMPS stands for Radical Action for Mountain Peoples Survival, and has been a presence for some time now, leading some gritty and dangerous protests against Mountaintop removal, including 50 person occupation in 2012 of the Hobet mountaintop removal mine, the largest strip mine on the east coast. Twenty or so people were arrested in that action, and spent up to two weeks in jail, including one of the student organizers of this trip to deliver water. Now RAMPS is helping to coordinate delivery of donated clean water to residents of the area.

About a month ago on January 9 a corrupt and poorly run and poorly regulated chemical company called Freedom Industries spilled some of a highly toxic chemical (MCHM) from its storage tanks into the Elk River, contaminating the water supply of 300,000 people in 9 counties. Freedom Industries has a very checkered history and connections to the Koch Brothers. It stores and sells chemicals used to process coal from West Virginia mines. At first FEMA and West Virginia Dept of Environmental Protection got involved, and the governor declared the Elk River water unsafe for all drinking, cooking and bathing. But within a week or so they pulled out and declared the water safe for everyone except pregnant women and babies under three. In the meantime Freedom Industries has declared bankruptcy.

People who we met in the Whitesville area didn't accept the reassurances coming from public authorities. Most complained that the water smelled, either with a licorice-like odor or of formaldehyde, which could be forming as a result of interactions between MCHM and other chemicals, plastics or metals in the pipes. Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen. Some said the water looks murky. A few complained that the odors permeated their houses. One young woman, who has two young children said she was losing hair and had developed a rash. No one we met believed that the water was safe. Even in the Walmart, where we drove to buy bottled water, when I tried to buy some hot coffee on the cold, rainy Sunday morning, I was told that none was available because of contaminated water.

So in all we had the 450 gallons of water we had carried from Asheville and another 800 gallons of bottled water we purchased with our \$400. When we arrived at the RAMPS office in Whitesville on Friday at midnight the RAMPS organizers Bagdhadi, Nat

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and De explained to us that on Saturday morning we might be working with a group from Texas called the Texas State Militia who do border patrolling in Texas and who had promised to bring 2000 gallons of water. So we talked about various scenarios of how to coordinate with them. As it turned out the Militia never showed up, and on Saturday morning feeling disorganized and chaotic, we were on our own.

First stop was Amazing Grace Covenant Church, a fairly new and spacious church in Seth, about 15 miles up route 3 from Whitesville. We set up our water operations in their front parking lot, and all day long people came in their cars, some with bottles of their own which we filled after answering the all important question of "where did this water come from?" Another group of us loaded bottles of water in two cars and went house to house in nearby Prenter Holler, a small neighborhood of trailers on Sand Lick Rd down the mountain from four coal mines. We knocked on doors of these old broken down homes with muddy mid-winter yards and asked people if they wanted free bottled water. No one turned us down. Many people were elderly and told us they had a hard time getting out. A couple of people said they were out of fresh clean water entirely and we had shown up just in time.

A little while later a student Emily and I set up my truck with its 210 gallons tank full of water in front of Tamara's trailer on the corner of Prenter Rd and Sand Lick Rd near a creek. Tamara, who is a high-spirited 35 year old woman with a tattoo on her neck, and 4 or 6 children living with her, is a natural-born community organizer. She roused two of her teenage daughters from their beds and somehow inspired them to go knock on doors up the holler telling people to come and get the water. She also put word out on Facebook. All day long as huge 18 wheelers loaded with coal rushed past on Prenter Road, families drove up in pick-up trucks or all terrain vehicles or cars, and we filled their bottles with the water which, I explained, came from my spring in North Carolina. "You brought this water all the way from N.C.?" "Yeah, we came here yesterday." "Oh, you are so kind. Thanks you for coming all this way." Seldom in my life have I felt such gratitude.

One older man gave us \$5 in appreciation. When I protested he replied, "You've gotta take it. Buy yourselves some coffee." He must not have realized even Walmart was not making coffee with water from the Elk River.. One very thin 61 year old man stayed long enough to tell us his story: "27 years in the mines, and now I have black lung and a herniated disc." A teenage high school girl spent 15 minutes talking with us: "I get all A's in school." She obviously loves school, and would be a teacher's joy, and I could not help but wonder where this holler will take her in five or in ten years, or whether maybe she could get out. And a young guy in a small RV talked about how the fish in the streams have disappeared in the last few years.

Everyone seemed dazed about what had happened, and more or less resigned to this new way of life. No one knows how long the water emergency will last or how they will cope as days and weeks may become months. No one talked about it, and although some

people clearly were angry at Freedom Industries or their public officials, no one talked about protest. A couple of people explained how until two or three years ago people had been drinking well water. However, the well water eventually became contaminated from coal slurry sludge which had been pumped into abandoned mines and then found its way into their ground water. And eventually their wells. At that point the public authorities insisted that people take water from the county. Now the public water supply is also too polluted for human consumption.

Immediately across the road was a fast moving stream, mostly covered with ice on this winter's day, flowing at a rate of maybe 1000 gallons a minute This would be enough water for a small town, and yet, there's no water for the 200 people in this holler to drink. And what about the animals and the fish? We could hear this water singing its way past us as a confederate flag flew above a nearby trailer and we filled people's gallons jugs with water hauled all the way from North Carolina.

At the end of the day a few of us gathered back in the parking lot of Grace Covenant Church to fill a few more gallon jugs and to pack up our supplies. As we were about to leave a woman walked up to us across Route 3 and with a friendly smile asked: "Hi. I'm Julia. I want to introduce myself and ask you if you folks oppose coal?" We chatted amicably for several minutes, letting her know that yes some of us had even been arrested protesting against coal, but at the same time avoiding a heated argument. She never did say where she stood on the issue. As she left, she waved and repeated with the same smile: "I just wanted to know where you stand."

Good question. For the last several days I've been pondering it. I have no questions about coal. It has to go. In North Carolina this week this has been made glaringly obvious to anyone willing to pay attention by the massive spill from a coal ash retainment pond owned by Duke Energy; up to 82 thousand tons of coal ash mixed with 27 million gallons of water has spilled into the Dan River, which is the public water supply for several nearby communities downstream. The river water and river bank has turned grey with the sludge, which contains a witches brew of poisons like arsenic, selenium, lead, and mercury

At the same time though, my heart breaks for the miners and their families who live in Prenter Holler. How do I tell them that coal, which is the bedrock of their homes and the icon of their culture and the center of their way of life – how can I tell these very poor people that their bedrock is not sustainable, and that it is killing their mountains, and killing their fish, and will, if not contained, kill much of human civilization?

I don't know how to answer Julia's questions, or how to spend the gentleman's \$5, or what to say to the high school girl, or how to bring the fish back, or even how to get a hot coffee at Walmart.

Steve Norris, 826-777-7816





**Veterans For Peace
Chapter 56**

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WE'RE ON THE WEB:
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John Schaefer, John Mulloy,
Ernie Behm**

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Veterans For Peace
Chapter 56
P.O. Box 532
Bayside, CA
95524

Join Us
HISTORIC BOAT DAY

"FUNDRAISER FOR 3 HISTORIC BOATS"

MARCH 15th, 2014

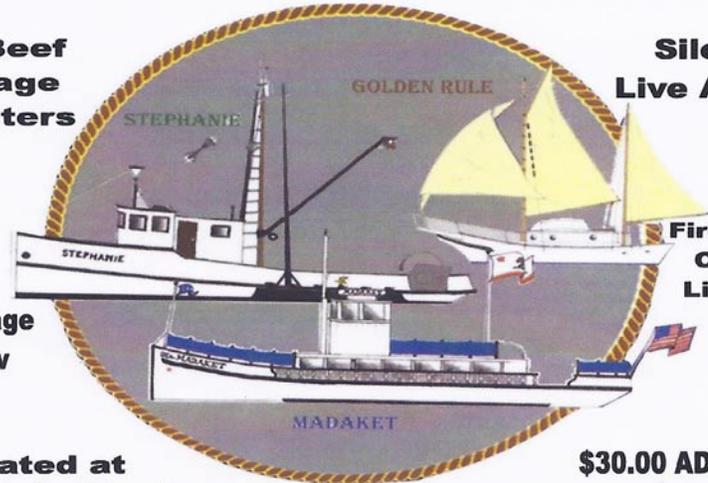
3:00 to 7:30 pm

PRESENTED BY THE Humboldt Bay Maritime Museum

View these historic vessels out of the water!

**Corned Beef
& Cabbage
BBQ Oysters**

**Silent &
Live Auction**



**Plus a Vintage
Boat Show**

**Fire Dancing
Cash Bar
Live Music**

**Located at
Zerlang & Zerlang
Marine Services Boat Yard
1493 Fay Ave, Samoa Ca.**

**\$30.00 ADULTS
\$20.00 STUDENTS/SR/JR
\$15.00 UNDER 12**

Get Tickets at humboldtbaymaritimemuseum.com

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