

Q&A

## 'They Needed Bodies'

**It took years for Vietnam vet Ron Perez to admit he suffered from PTSD. Now he leads San Francisco's jail-based program to help a new generation of troubled young men.**

By Katti Gray

Vietnam War veteran Ron Perez, a former U.S. Army combat medic, retired as a community program director for the City and County of San Francisco Sheriff's Department in 2008, two years after being diagnosed with bladder cancer he contends was related to exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant herbicide the U.S. military used in Vietnam.

In 2011, Perez came out of retirement to direct the department's then-newly launched Community of Veterans Engaged in Restoration (COVER) project, one of the first in a handful of such special treatment units for incarcerated veterans.

In a recent conversation with Katti Gray, a contributing editor for *The Crime Report* and a 2014-15 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow, he discussed COVER's approach to helping veterans with mental illness, his own comparatively recently diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and why some vets hide their combat stress for fear of being stigmatized.

**The Crime Report:** *What drew you to your work with veterans?*

**Perez:** I was very young, 20 years old, when I was in Vietnam. I was 21 when I came home. It was 1968, and the country was pretty much in chaos over Vietnam. One of the first things I did was become a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. It gave me a sense of purpose. Why did I survive? What are my skills and how can I transfer them to something positive? ... I've been working with veterans [as an activist and government employee] since 1975.

**TCR:** *Even as a medic who was not a medical doctor, or a mental health clinician, were there times when you concluded that someone was in mental distress that was combat-related?*

**Perez:** Yes, you'd see emotional breakdowns. And you'd have to recommend that people be taken out of the field. There would be symptoms of post-traumatic stress and immediate stress. [**Editor's note: PTSD became an official medical term in 1980.**]

**TCR:** *Were you pre-screened, as you were being drafted, for signs or risks for mental illness?*

**Perez:** The basic screening was: ‘You can talk, you can walk, you can breathe. You have nothing wrong with your feet. Yay.’ I was drafted during the highest draft period. People were being drafted left and right, even with medical conditions. They needed bodies ...

I had just gotten a job with the post office and was saving my money to go to college. I worked at the post office where I got my draft notice. My supervisor, who had retired from the military, looked over my soldier and said, ‘Ah, you got something in the mail.’ He applauded when I opened it up.

**TCR:** *You came out of retirement to run the San Francisco County Jail’s special unit for veterans. Why?*

**Perez:** The good thing about this time is that we had the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs] support. Back in Vietnam, if you were incarcerated, the VA would not deal with you. Their approach was ‘We will see you after your incarceration.’ This go-round, the VA said they would not make the mistakes they made during Vietnam.

Having the VA on board helped tremendously in getting community agencies on board with the COVER project. When we started ... we had the interests of so many community groups, Wounded Warriors, Swords to Plowshares ... We had Jail Psychiatric Services on board, which was essential. Getting the Sheriff’s Department on board in building a system for identifying veterans when they came in [to be booked] ... all of this was crucial. This was three years before San Francisco’s veterans treatment court started. COVER was a catalyst for the court.

**TCR:** *How many COVER project veterans had been diagnosed with mental illness, whether or not that illness was military-related?*

**Perez:** When we started five years ago, most of the COVER population were Vietnam veterans who were drug-addicted. Jail Psychiatric Services staff didn’t believe a lot of their symptoms were PTSD-related. We didn’t necessarily agree with that. But it was hard for the jail’s psychiatric staff to determine whether their issues were drug-oriented or actual mental illnesses.

**TCR:** *No one knew whether the drug abuse was masking a mental problem?*

**Perez:** Correct ... It’s been very hard, in many ways, to get firm statistics about veterans. We do know that, in most cases, our veterans never had contact with the criminal justice system until after the military. We believe that, with combat veterans, especially, there is a correlation with their involvement in criminal justice and their military experience ... Someone should be studying this.

**TCR:** *Did you return from Vietnam with your own emotional and mental challenges?*

**Perez:** Yes, I had combat stress, still have it. I didn't file for VA benefits until my cancer came up. At that time, they gave me a 30 percent [disability] rating for PTSD.

**TCR:** *Why did you wait until 2006 to get checked for PTSD?*

**Perez:** Probably because of the stigma. Working in the sheriff's department, you didn't necessarily want people to know about your PTSD.

**TCR:** *And now that your PTSD is known?*

**Perez:** My colleagues said, jokingly, 'See, we told you.'

**TCR:** *What does being diagnosed do for you?*

**Perez:** That's a tricky question for me: It gives me more services and a small pension from the VA ... I knew the PTSD was always there.

**TCR:** *Do you take prescription medication for it?*

**Perez:** No.

**TCR:** *What does a 30 percent rating for PTSD mean?*

**Perez:** I get \$400 month from the government and certain medical benefits that I didn't have before.

*Katti Gray, contributing editor of The Crime Report, and a 2014-15 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow, welcomes readers' comments.*