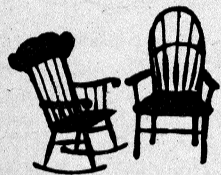


# 'I Grew Up With John Wayne'

Dennis Kroll, 34, was born and raised in Racine. An army draftee in 1969, he served in Vietnam for six months as a combat infantry squad leader with the 101st Airborne Division, I Corps. Mortar shrapnel wounds put him in military hospitals where he spent another six months. He has had 19 operations on his hands, which are "numb and cold." He draws a disability pension of 50% for his hands and 10% for PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Now Midwest regional coordinator for the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), he has been "speaking to high school students about Vietnam" since 1973.

"I like to talk to high schools because I wish somebody had talked to me when I was in high school. I had no awareness of what was going on—no political basis, no information to make a judgment. My father had



## Listening In with George Vukelich

been a POW in World War II—he was in the infantry—but he never talked to me about it.

"It's important for young people to hear all sides about the military. I don't want to make up their minds for them. I want them to benefit from my experience. Recruiters come in and talk to them about the services and paint a very rosy picture. I tell them my experiences.

"I grew up with John Wayne and 'krauts' and 'nips,' and then you get to Vietnam and see a hard-working people with a culture older than ours, deeply respectful of ancestors, of elders, of children. You're an enemy in a land where you thought you were a savior. Who are you saving when you're killing everybody? Nam was genocidal: the search and destroy missions, the chemical warfare, the napalm, the free fire zones, the bombs. Someone flying at 20,000 feet doesn't see what bombs do to people.

"I tell the students that for every Nam veteran who was out in the jungle, the delta, doing the fighting, there were seven to 10 people in the rear areas doing support. The people there didn't see the war beyond their perimeter.

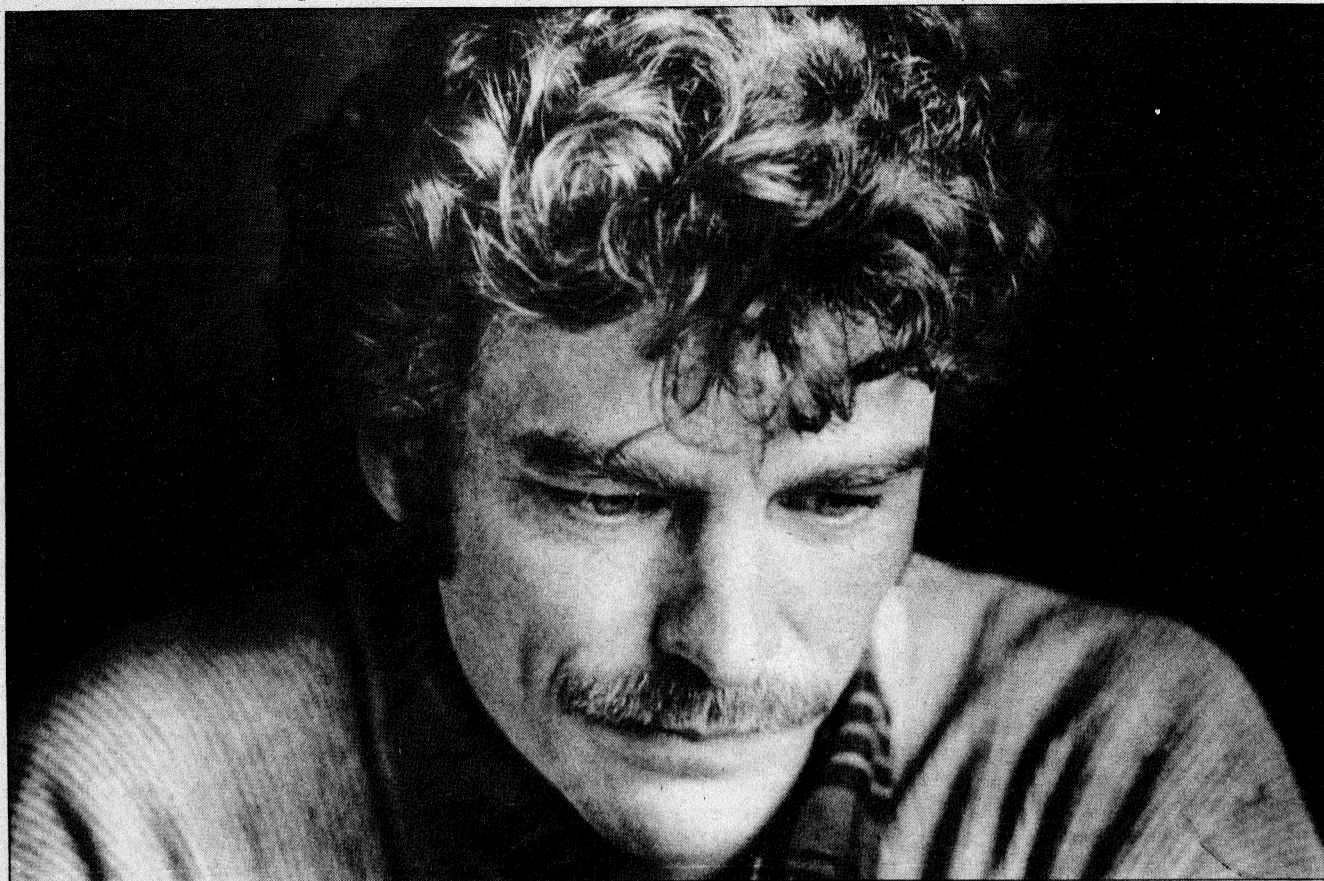
"Our company once got sent back to a rest area at Phu Bi. They put us behind concertina wire—it looked exactly like the holding area where they put relocated Vietnamese. I really think they didn't want us talking to rear area troops.

"We cut a hole in the wire and got out. They had PXs, clubs, massage parlors on the base. The higher ranks had their own hooches, maids, whores—the liquor was cheap, the drugs were cheap. It didn't seem like there was a war going on. And we told ourselves: *This is how they do it.* This was a good deal for some.

"Even after I got home, it bothered me to talk to Nam vets who said they had it pretty good over there. We couldn't relate to vets who told John Wayne stories—'then we cut off their ears'—and how cheap the whores were, how cheap the drugs were. That's why I started talking to high school students.

"You can pick out the macho kids who have a fantasy about war, about being wounded. I tell them I saw John Wayne die many times when I was growing up, but I never saw him lose an arm or a leg. In real war you don't always take a clean flesh wound. I tell them what I saw in Nam, in the military hospitals in Japan and Great Lakes. Sometimes you lose legs, arms, eyes. Sometimes you lose your mind. One kid told me he would kill himself if that happened to him and I asked him: 'How?'

"Once in Nam we went to an opium den. There was a very old Vietnamese man lying there. He would come out of his trance, talking, excited, agitated. The proprietor said if the old man was bothering us he would throw him out. We thought the old man was



Dennis Kroll. Photo by Brent Nicastro

seeing spiders, because that's what we were seeing.

"The old man was talking about his beautiful family—all gone. They were still alive, but the women of his family were prostitutes now and the children were selling

their mothers and their sisters as whores, and they were all dead in the old man's eyes.

"The old man was there to die, too—to kill himself with the opium. Papasan would roll another ball and the old man would smoke it until he passed out again.

"That's what bothers me when people

here say: 'We have to help these Third World nations.'

"The military always asks the kids: 'What's two years out of your life?' I tell the kids, well, it's more than two years. It's been 12 years for me and it still hurts. And if I live to be 101, it will be 80 years out of my life."