

'We Were Able to Share the Experiences We Had'

Professors at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island are teaching graduate students about the Vietnam War, comparing that war to the fighting that happened in Afghanistan and Iraq

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Almost five decades after the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ended, students at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, are learning about the complexities of the Vietnam War.

Many Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans have taken the course, with some realizing that the Vietnam War has many similarities to the war that took place in southeast Asia.

Matt Tackett, a professor at the Naval War College and former student of the class, was one of them. Before being an instructor of the class, Tackett retired as an Army colonel. He served in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

"I remember being a student, and through the course, I noticed eerie similarities of lessons not learned and the events I was learning about the Vietnam War," the former Army infantry officer said.

A LONG WAR

Tackett, a VFW Department of Louisiana member, said that taking the course was "cathartic" in some ways.

"We were able to share the experiences we had in Iraq and Afghanistan through the means of learning about a different conflict," he said.

The course — Vietnam: A Long War from Conflict to Country — covers the history of Vietnam, including its precolonial period to today. While the course mainly focuses on the Vietnam War, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars are discussed regarding how lessons were

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learned and implemented in the post-9/11 wars.

The classes are led by Naval War College Professor Albion Bergstrom. The course includes lectures, as well as analyzing books (some about the post-9/11 wars) and films. It also requires students to interview a Vietnam War veteran. Many students, Bergstrom said, have fathers who fought in the Vietnam War.

“Many students were platoon leaders and had fathers who also were platoon leaders in Vietnam,” said Bergstrom, a Life member of VFW Post 4487 in Middletown, R.I. “Before that, a lot of them had never talked before. There have been a lot of students whose fathers died in the Vietnam War.”

ADDING OTHER EXPERIENCES TO THE CURRICULUM

Bergstrom said that some of the topics discussed during the course are things he wished he had known as a young military officer.

Bergstrom said that the course has evolved over the years. After Sept. 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, he and his students began discussing them in class.

“As those veterans came back from Iraq and Afghanistan, it was special to have them in the classroom,” Bergstrom said. “Those students saw many similarities [between the two wars].”

Bergstrom, who has taught the class since 1998, is a Vietnam War veteran who served as leader of 3rd Plt., A Trp., 4th Sqdn., 12th Armd. Cav, 1st Bde., 5th Inf. Div. (Mech) in Vietnam from 1970 to 1971. He said that in the class, students learn the perspectives of both sides of the Vietnam War. Bergstrom added that he doesn’t push his own beliefs about subjects taught in the course.

“One thing I want to make sure of in these classes is to not step on people’s emotions and opinions,” Bergstrom said. “I try to respect everyone’s thoughts. I want students to think out loud some of the things that they see and let them learn from it.”

‘WE ARE ALL PRISONERS TO OUR OWN EXPERIENCE’

The goal of the course, Bergstrom said, is to foster an environment that lets students reflect on their own military service and not make some of the mistakes that were made in the past. He also teaches some of the misconceptions from the Vietnam War. Another goal of the class is to make sure factual information is taught. There are many misconceptions of the Vietnam War, Bergstrom said.

Tackett said that it is common for people to be unaware of the details of the war and that he and other instructors make sure to explain why certain events happened.

“We are all prisoners to our own experience,” Tackett said. “Sometimes you only hear about one year of the Vietnam War or one unit that was there. You don’t always get the full story.”

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