

## WHY I'VE JOINED VFP'S EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

By Jim Janko

In the Viet Nam War, which the Vietnamese call the American War, I was a medic in an infantry battalion commanded by Colonel George Armstrong Custer III. My unit suffered heavy casualties, and I also saw immense destruction to the earth.

By the time I left Viet Nam, I realized that war is *not* primarily a soldier's story. I don't say this to in any way disparage our soldiers, especially since those in our current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are generally ignored by an American public that is far removed from their experience. I say war is not primarily a soldier's story because civilians bear the brunt of it, and the land and the animals are the most silent casualties.

In Viet Nam, I saw first-hand the destruction in the Cu Chi and Tay Ninh countryside, the forests and fields razed by bombs and defoliants, the land seemingly stripped of all life for as far as the eye could see. Sometimes I felt we were fighting the earth itself. Gun-ships could put a bullet in every square inch of a football field in less than a minute. Bombers, B-52s, blew apart rice fields, sugar palms, birds, bees, water buffalo, fish, grass, leaves—whatever conceals or sustains “the enemy.” If we couldn't find the Vietnamese, we could—and did—blow up their land.

The destruction occurring because of climate change dwarfs the almost indescribable devastation I witnessed in Viet Nam. No organization in the world emits more greenhouse gases than the Pentagon. For this reason, issues of militarism and the consequences of militarism need to be at

the forefront of the climate movement. The budget for the U.S. military in 2020 was \$732 billion. The Pentagon purports to defend the American people, yet its actions—both here and throughout the world—endanger all of life. The U.S. has not been invaded since 1812, yet we have some 800 overseas bases. Much of the Pentagon's budget needs to be redirected towards environmental restoration, preservation, and the genuine needs of people, here and abroad.

Climate change disproportionately affects the Global South. Wealthy nations in the northern hemisphere have a huge carbon footprint, while poorer nations in the South suffer the brunt of the consequences. The infrastructure of the fossil fuel industry, both abroad and in the U.S., is almost always located in areas struggling with poverty. The world's polluted neighborhoods are generally poor neighborhoods. To work for climate justice is to work for social and economic justice.

I was a medic in Viet Nam, and in some ways I'm still a medic. This is why I've joined VFP's efforts to address climate change and militarism.