



CORNELLCHRONICLE

Sept. 24, 2014

A surgeon's view of veterans and the Vietnam War

By Justin Pascoe

cunews@cornell.edu

After completing medical school, Gus Kappler '61, M.D. '65, was drafted into the army as a surgeon and arrived in Phu Bai, Vietnam, in September 1970.

In his Sept. 23 campus presentation, "Battlefield Trauma: Vietnam to Afghanistan," Kappler offered a harrowing glimpse into his Vietnam experience. One slide in his presentation pictured the doctor and fellow soldiers relaxing in a makeshift hot tub.

Others portrayed graphic images of his maimed patients, a

nurse in an operating room surrounded by peace signs and the halfway house where soldiers "smoked all the pot they could" to help them detox from heroin.

"The worst part of all this," recalled Kappler of the latter image, was that "the recalcitrant soldiers – the druggies – were put into special platoons, and they were sent on the most dangerous missions you could find, the idea [being] to eliminate them."

In the chaos of war, Kappler and his fellow surgeons "performed miracles," he said. "Often we would two-team the patient; one would work on the arm and one would work on the abdomen." With only one X-ray machine, frequent rocket attacks and monsoon flooding that resulted in having to "put some frogs in [the operating room] to eat the mosquitos," Kappler said he fought an uphill battle to save lives.

"Before Vietnam, I was drafted and I was angry," Kappler said. "I went to see the movie 'M*A*S*H,' and I said 'OK, there's Donald Sutherland. I'm going to act just like him, and I'm going to survive.'"

Decades later, Kappler has continued to promote veterans' rights, addressing issues within the U.S.



Lindsay France/University Photography

Vietnam veteran Gus Kappler '61, M.D. '65, speaks on campus Sept. 23.

Department of Veterans Affairs. “Two in 10 who served in country have died prematurely,” Kappler said of Vietnam veterans. “This is the cost of war decades later.”

He said soldiers in Vietnam were routinely exposed to solutions containing two parts per million dioxin, the toxic compound in the herbicide Agent Orange. “Five parts per trillion caused cancer in laboratory rats,” Kappler said. “The U.S. government and Presidents Johnson, Kennedy and Nixon were fully aware of the toxicity, and they still dumped it on us. To me that’s criminal.”

When you take into account the deaths caused by Agent Orange and the birth defects that occurred as a result of exposure to it, the Vietnam death toll rises from 47,378 killed in action to “about a million and a half deaths,” Kappler said. “And it’s still decimating the Vietnamese because the depots where it was stored are still rampant with dioxin.”

A great deal changed between the Vietnam War and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Kappler said, but he believes aid provided by the VA “has to change. ... The U.S. military does a great job of teaching you how to kill ... but the military does not do anything to teach soldiers to readjust to society. All veterans that go to war are permanently changed.”

He continued: “Killing just sort of rips the soul out of you to a certain degree, and you have to get that soul back in you before you can become a functional citizen again.”

Soldiers are “judged by a politically correct, factually censored, unsupportive society,” Kappler said, and this, accompanied by the military expectation of machismo, leaves veterans feeling isolated.

“There’s nothing wrong with hugging your buddy,” he concluded. “We call it brotherhood. ... Brotherhood is the macho way of covering it. Soldiers should be given the opportunity to break down and be hugged by their buddies.”

Kappler’s talk was sponsored by the Cornell Vietnam War 50th Commemoration Committee, the Cornell University Veteran Colleague Network Group and the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Justin Pascoe '17 is a writer intern for the Cornell Chronicle.

Find more Cornell news online at news.cornell.edu.

Source URL: <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/2014/09/surgeons-view-veterans-and-vietnam-war>