

# Called to Serve Reviews

'Called to Serve' had to be written  
By IRMARIE JONES

Special to The Recorder

"Called to Serve, Stories of Men and Women Confronted by the Vietnam War Draft" by Tom Weiner is, to me, a book that just had to be written.

In his dedication, the author said: "To all who gave so freely of their time, energy and memory to promote the long overdue healing that still needs to occur almost 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War.' In the preface he said, "Over the decades, I have waited for someone to recognize and write about the profound fork in the road facing those of us affected by military conscription in the 1960s and 1970s."

Weiner has a chapter on the "Draft in America" that begins with the Revolutionary War. This is a thorough book.

Then, comes the chapter on "Those Who Served": some were drafted, some enlisted. The author was fortunate that some of those actually drafted agreed to speak to him.

Chapter three is a surprise, outlining memories from "Those Who Left"; in other words, those who moved to Canada to escape the draft, something not seen since World War II. Weiner talks confidentially with a man who did it. He even records what one ex-wife said about leaving him after they moved to Canada.

"Those Who Refused" talks about those who took what was an almost unheard of action for those times. One name that should be remembered locally on that subject is Randy Kehler, who was often in stories in The Greenfield Recorder-Gazette, expressing his reasons for refusing to be drafted. Eventually, he was arrested and served two years in jail.

This is why I feel everyone should read "Called to Serve," to find out how the United States treated those who really did refuse to serve.

Eight men are willing to share the methods they used to beat the draft. One man did some strange things to give himself a deferment. He deliberately failed a test given to those entering the service. By giving the wrong answers on a psychiatric test, he was released.

Weiner even included in a final chapter those who loved, supported and counseled draftees: Diane Clancy, Frances Crowe, Diane Bowman and Libby Holtzman are the names.

For young people who have no idea what it was like during the Vietnam War, this is an exciting book that will fill in the blank spaces.

"Called to Serve" is available through World Eye Bookshop in Greenfield.

Irmarie Jones started working at The Recorder as a reporter in 1969. In addition to reviewing books, she has written her 'Just Plain Neighbors' column for The Recorder since 1977. She can be reached at [\[email protected\]](#)

■ Book Review: I feel everyone should read "Called to Serve," to find out how the United States treated those who really did refuse to serve.

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## **Book offers broad perspective of Vietnam-era vets who were 'Called to Serve'**

By Steve Pfarrer

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Tom Weiner still vividly remembers the day in the spring of 1971 when he had to report to his draft board for a U.S. Army physical - and possible deployment to Vietnam, for a conflict he adamantly opposed. Weiner, just graduated from Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., readied for the visit by filing an application for conscientious objector (CO) status and taking along documents from doctors that detailed medical problems, such as a back injury.

None of that proved necessary when he reported to his draft board in Newark, N.J. Weiner says an Army psychiatrist asked him two questions: Had he ever smoked marijuana, and had he ever had suicidal thoughts? When Weiner said yes to both, he was turned down for service, the psychiatrist writing the words "drug abuse" on Weiner's draft papers.

Yet, Weiner remembers, "The room was full of other young guys, and every one of them was black. I knew one of them would be going to Vietnam in my place." It was a thought that haunted him for years.

From the experience, Weiner, 62, a longtime sixth-grade teacher at the Smith Campus School in Northampton, has fashioned a Studs Terkelesque oral history of people like himself who had to make a fateful decision about Vietnam in the late 1960s and early '70s, or who counseled draftees or got caught up in the issue in other ways.

"Called to Serve," published in May by Levelers Press in Florence, features 26 in-depth interviews with men - predominantly from this region - who were drafted. Their responses to that summons - serving in the military, seeking CO status, going to jail, leaving the country or finding some way to beat the draft - offer a powerful snapshot of an issue that roiled the nation and upended the lives of millions of Americans.

For Weiner, who began working on his book seven years ago, "Called to Serve" represents the completion of what he believes is a unique historical project: the first book to offer a broad range of perspectives on the Vietnam-era draft.

"There have been a lot of books on Vietnam, but they've all focused on a specific aspect of it," he said. "There are books about guys who saw combat, books about people who went to Canada, about people who went to jail. But I saw no book that had all of it and I thought, 'This is what I'm going to do - this is my calling.' "

Perhaps more important, the book became a big emotional investment, both for him and for the people he interviewed.

"It was a tremendous honor to receive these stories," Weiner said. "For a lot of [interviewees], it was the first time they'd talked about their experiences in this kind of depth, or the first time in years they'd revisited them."

At times, he adds, he'd have to turn off his tape recorder when someone became too distraught to talk.

"I have the experience of seeing them in pain. Some said they got in touch with feelings and emotions they hadn't experienced in a long time ... so I'm very grateful for the level of trust they showed me in sharing these powerful and very personal stories."

Through word of mouth, some public presentations about his project and other means, Weiner eventually found 61 people to interview. Though he initially set out just to talk to men who had beaten the draft in some way - for instance, faking mental illness or pretending to be gay - he broadened his approach to include people whose lives were more broadly affected by the draft, such as Libby Holtzman, a Belchertown woman who moved to Canada with her then-husband, who had left the country to avoid military service.

Eventually, he winnowed down the interviews to make the book more manageable. the additional stories are cataloged on a blog, [www.iraqandvietnamwarstories.com/blog](http://www.iraqandvietnamwarstories.com/blog) [1]. "It was painful to have to take any of the stories out because they're all so good," he said.

Weiner, who's taught at the Smith Campus School for 35 years, says he felt compelled to write the book because he feared his generation's stories would be lost. Given the societal divisions that emerged during the Vietnam era, he writes in the book's introduction, "More healing needs to occur for our country to learn Vietnam's lessons. ... Creating a broader understanding can go a long way to help the Vietnam generation stop reliving the war or seeking someone to blame for its outcome."

## **The stories**

What emerges in many cases in "Called to Serve" are portraits of young men, or teenagers, who often had little awareness of what was happening in Vietnam but were suddenly forced to make a critical decision about it. Al Miller of Montague, who's been involved for years in the Amherst-based Veterans Education Project, recalls getting his draft notice in the mid-1960s and experiencing only "a mild sense of pride that I had passed this masculine threshold."

A few years later, Miller was in combat with an infantry unit in Vietnam - and, he says, the bloodshed, the racial tension in his unit and others, and the hatred most U.S. soldiers had for the Vietnamese turned him against the war and left his own life in turmoil. As he says in the book,

"You are still left with a damaged soul, and the only way to repair a damaged soul is in doing things for other people." He would later spend time with a group that counseled combat vets.

Chuck Hommes, a carpenter from Florence, got a high draft number and, thinking he'd avoid being sent to Vietnam by enlisting in the Army, rather than being drafted, signed up after a recruiter in Springfield told him "you can go anywhere you want."

He hoped to get sent to West Germany but instead found himself ticketed for Vietnam, where he served as a helicopter repairman. Marijuana, heroin and other substances were in plentiful supply, and Hommes says he became addicted.

"For me, doing drugs was an escape," Hommes says in the book. "I basically couldn't deal with what was happening to me in 'nam."

Two other Florence residents, Craig Dreeszen and his wife, Diane Bowman, both originally from Nebraska, moved to rural Ontario, Canada, for over a decade after Dreeszen passed his draft physical. They lived hand-to-mouth for several years, going without running water and working odd jobs before coming back to the U.S. in the 1980s and settling in this area.

Dreeszen, who is retired from a teaching position in the continuing education department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, says his life would have been different if not for the draft.

"I'm sure I would have gone to graduate school and then gotten an academic teaching post." But, he adds, "I don't have any regrets."

Another man Weiner interviewed, Jim Thornley of Wendell, got married in California in the late 1960s and spent the next few years traveling around the country with his wife; they'd work for a while, save money, then visit another part of the country. But the FBI was on his trail. He'd been drafted but had refused to report for induction because he opposed the war.

Thornley, today a salesman, was jailed in 1970 for two years for refusing to serve. His marriage did not survive his prison term, which he says left him broken emotionally for some time after he was freed. Years later he re-established a friendship with his ex-wife.

"That's why I'm so glad this book has come out," he said in a phone interview. "I think it's really important to show how our military impacts so many people's lives. Then, it was Vietnam. Today, it's Afghanistan and Iraq. What might it be in the future?"

### **Collaborative effort**

Weiner says he originally had a contract with Macmillan Publishers for his book. At that time, though, the publishing world was in an uproar over the memoir "A Million Little Pieces" by

James Frey, a tale of the author's alleged drug-riddled past that was shown to be full of fabrications. Macmillan wanted Weiner to fact-check all of his interviews, and he declined.

"I didn't have the time or resources for that," Weiner said.

After that deal fell through, Weiner got together with local historian Steve Strimer, a friend who works at Collective Copies in Florence, which runs Levelers Press. Strimer was interested in the project, and once Weiner trimmed "Called to Serve" - he got editing help from some writer friends in that process - he handed it over to Strimer.

Weiner also got Charlie Clements, a Vietnam-era Air Force veteran turned human rights activist, and Victoria Safford, the former minister of the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence, to write a preface and afterword, respectively, for the book. "I'm thrilled to have their contributions," he said.

His hope is that high schools and colleges will be interested in using the book to examine an era of U.S. history that continues to reverberate. The stories in "Called to Serve," he writes, can "perhaps shed some light on what is happening, and not happening, now."

Tom Weiner will read from "Called to Serve" Tuesday at 7 p.m. at the Odyssey Bookshop in South Hadley.

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Links: [1] <http://calledtoservevietnam.com/blog>

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Weiner, Tom. *Called To Serve: Stories of Men and Women Confronted by the Vietnam War Draft*. Amherst and Florence, Massachusetts: Levellers Press, 2011.

A review by John J. Fitzgerald

Tom Weiner, the author of *Called To Serve: Stories of Men and Women Confronted by the Vietnam War Draft*, has created an important historical document that deserves a wide readership, despite its flaws.

If we really want to build a better world, it would be great to see this book on the desk of every high school guidance counselor in America. For those who wish to fathom, the dilemmas and challenges that the Vietnamese Conflict (Technically, it is not listed as a war.) brought to the young men of this country, in the 1960s and early 1970s, I recommend it. It is an important companion piece to some of the better histories of that period. (Marilyn B. Young's *The Vietnam Wars* remains the best single volume on the history of the Vietnam Conflict.)

The book attempts to reveal the full spectrum of reactions to the military draft laws that all eligible males over the age of 18 faced during the years of the Vietnam Conflict. For the most part, it succeeds.

Weiner starts off with a brief history of the draft in American history. Interestingly enough, there is a long, rather well hidden, history of dissent with respect to conscription in the United States. Daniel Webster, for one, denounced it as a form of “Napoleonic despotism,” at the time of the War of 1812

The book then gets into the different categories of response to the Vietnam era draft.

Chapter Two is entitled, “Those Who Served.” This gives us the views of seven individuals who in their own way came to join the service. As is the case for most of the book, the overwhelming majority of interviewees are from the Western Massachusetts area. None of them seem to think their service was in any way worthwhile. The reports given are not verified and there does not seem to be much fact checking. For example, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) did not refuse to recruit members who served in Vietnam. (p.43) Discharge papers are usually listed as DD214, not DD215 (p.43) But this chapter does give the narrators their chance to tell their story, as they remember it. Not all of them actually served in Vietnam. Missing are the stories of people who were and are proud of their years of military service. There were and are such folks.

This chapter is followed by “Those Who Left.” The three stories included here tell of those who went to Canada to avoid the draft. Their stories differ from each other, but eventually they all return to the USA. I was surprised to find myself without much sympathy for any of them. They chose to flee. On the other hand, none of them claim nobility for their behavior. Did all those who fled to Canada return to the USA? I am guessing that many found Canada to be a more civilized country than their birthplace

The four stories in the chapter “Those who Refused,” are gripping and unique. Each person went through their own gauntlet because of their refusal to submit. I admired the courage of these folks, but found myself wondering about their political perspective. They seemed to basically reject the authority of the government to govern their behavior. Their position seems close to anarchism.

Chapter Five deals with –“Those Who Found Ways To Beat The Draft.”

The eight stories here are the stories of “draft dodgers” and the author is quite sympathetic to them. It was his own response to the draft as well. These are the folks who joined the National Guard, faked ill health to be named 4-F, got married to beat the system, faked being crazy, and outright lied about their mental and physical health, etc. This is the largest collection of stories and suggests that this was the most widespread form of resistance. Most of the narrators express shame at their behavior. Few of them became active in the anti-war movement, except for their personal escape from the draft. However, their resistance, even if unprincipled, was an important part of the anti-war movement. Social Class seems to have been a major factor in the makeup of this group. Cf. Chris Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Chapter Six focuses on “– Those Who Chose Conscientious Objection.” There are four stories in this section. In many ways, these are the most noble. They object to killing and refuse to be part of the process. They don’t look for a way to dodge the question, but rather face it – head on. The principal characteristic of this group is that they are well educated. They have studied the law and they know their rights. They are assisted by people who know the legal system and who are animated by a powerful resistance to war and militarism. I found myself wondering how they differ from those cited in Chapter Four and wish the author had reflected on this.

The final chapter covers “Those Who Loved, Supported and Counseled.” There are only four stories in this section, which strikes me as grossly unfair. Only four stories? Women were exempt from the draft, but thousands of them served. They served as nurses and as Red Cross volunteers. None of those stories are told here.

And what about the anti-war women in Western Massachusetts? None of the women who objected to the Vietnam conflict were legally obliged to serve, but millions of them did speak out against the war. They spoke out publicly and articulately. They did this at “teach-ins” and anti-war rallies. They wrote letters to the editor and petitioned Congress. They organized anti-war marches and worked in anti-war political campaigns. The author does not give enough credit to those women who spoke out, even though they could have remained silent. Their dissent was never dismissed as cowardice. In fact, it was admired and respected, and in some cases feared. Surely women then, as now, did more than “loved, supported and counseled.”

This is not to take anything away from the four women who tell their stories here. One of the best is the story of Frances Crowe of Northampton. Frances was a draft counselor during the war and was one of the principal organizers of the anti-war movement in Western Massachusetts. She is one of my favorite people on this planet. I am glad to see her story told here and given the recognition it and she deserves. The Quaker tradition is a just and admirable one and she embodied that tradition in practice. In fact, she still does!

The book stirred many old memories and emotions. As a Vietnam veteran, I chose to walk down some different paths than these folks. As a Vietnam Veteran Against the War, we were heading in the same direction

I entered the US Army in 1964 and left in 1968. I joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War in 1968 and I am still a member.

Most of those who opposed the Vietnam Conflict knew their history and acted out of thoughtful moral principles. They saw the war as a legacy of French Colonialism and modern American imperialism and militarism. It was not a war necessary for the defense of the United States. Nor was it a war for democracy and freedom. It was an unjust war and its methods were despicable. A key tool for the war machine was the Selective Service System.

The stories collected and retold here offer insight into what war does to people and how it affects their consciences, their families and their lives. These effects are largely unintended, but nonetheless real.

I should add that the volume would have benefitted from a less confusing historical timeline (Diem was killed before JFK.), an index and a more carefully constructed bibliography. As it stands, primary and secondary sources are not indicated and there are some rather arbitrary and capricious entries. (Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne??!) No doubt cost was a factor, but some photographs would have helped.

Tom Weiner has done his community service in compiling this collection of stories.

Our community service is to make sure his work reaches a wider audience.

John J. Fitzgerald is a Vietnam veteran. He is the co-author of *The Vietnam War: A History in Documents*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. He is a member of Veterans for Peace and Vietnam Veterans Against the War.