

Interview with Rick Ritter Co-author of *Made in America, Sold in the Nam*

Reader Views welcomes Rick Ritter, co-author of *Made In America, Sold in the Nam*, (2nd Edition). Rick is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us today Rick. We are happy to have the opportunity to talk with you about your book *Made In America, Sold in the Nam*, now in its second edition. Would you start by telling us what your book is about, and comment on its thought-provoking title?

Rick: The book is about the experiences of Viet Nam combat veterans, kids of vets, female veterans, widows of veterans. It is the journaling of the above mentioned people most of whom are from Northeast Indiana. The title is actually pretty literal as my memory serves me from the early 1980s when the first edition was put together. These people were made in America and many of them believe they were sold down the river in Viet Nam. Many of them believe they were betrayed.

Juanita: The original edition of *Made in America, Sold in the Nam* was a collaborative effort between you and the late Paul Richards. What inspired this partnership and your book?

Rick: Paul was the news director at sister radio station in Fort Wayne (WMEE and WQHK) -I have asked over the years for my clients to write or do other creative work to assist in the healing process - Paul had already written some of his thoughts and feelings as a result of some college work and in connection with his job - it was a process he was already acclimated to - it was a way to share peoples thoughts and feelings with many more people than we would ever normally encounter - many veterans don't want the lessons in their lives to be wasted.

Juanita: What is new in the second edition, and why did you decide at this time, to rework the original?

Rick: The 2nd edition is twice to three times the size of the original text, there are pictures, drawings, maps, glossary, lists of resources, and a historical timeline and unfortunately there are pieces written about the authors who are now dead.

Juanita: Rick, I understand that you were once a Marine, and then went on to work for many years with veterans in many different capacities. Would you give us an idea of your background and experience in working with veterans of war? What was your general understanding of the war experience working with veterans?

Rick: I was a marine from July 68 to December 70 - I worked in the vet center program for almost eight years in the eighties when the program was first launched. I spent about 5 months in Bethesda Naval Hospital with a knee injury incurred at marine Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Quantico. I was on a 55 bed ward with medevacs from Viet Nam - I learned more about combat vets and their issues there than any other single place. My general understanding of the war experience is that all people are changed by it- some weather it better than others.

Juanita: Many stories in your book talk about the indoctrination process of military personnel. Would you elaborate on this process, and its long lasting effects on the mental health of an individual?

Rick: The process of indoctrination is put forth to attempt to take individuals out of their habits of acting as individuals and molding them into part of a unit or group. People are taught to react and respond to stimuli and not to think about what they are doing or the consequences. This is problematic in society once a person is separated from active duty status.

Juanita: A common feeling for many veterans is anger and confusion regarding the way they were regarded by the government and civilians upon their return and integration back into life. What are your thoughts on the commonality of these feelings? How can vets today be more informed and prepared for returning home?

Rick: I am not sure integration has occurred for many vets to this day - can they fake it sure, some have figured out a way to be okay in spite of many obstacles. It is hard to generalize about this - there is much variation on this theme - I am not sure what you mean by informed and prepared - the world, families, life has moved on and the vet has been out of the loop - I am not convinced it is so easy to get back in step when some things cannot be retrieved. When one is gone for an extended period of time the single goal is to survive for most. I don't think vets can afford to just take what people tell them as the gospel - they have to become critical thinkers somewhere along the line but that goes against the grain of what the military wants from them.

Juanita: What type of statistics do you have regarding percentages of war veterans and family members that are still suffering in silence?

Rick: I presume you are referring to Viet Nam? I have seen no stats on this - all I have is experiences and the experiences of others anecdotally that tells me that there are still vets that periodically start working on this stuff for the first time. Many are approaching the age where their own mortality is coming into focus and many around them are aging or dying - some have kids or grandkids that are in Iraq or Afghanistan. But I must also add that there are many that have been in Panama, Somalia, covert ops all over the world that haven't begun to deal with anything either.

Juanita: From studying the lives of Vietnam War veterans, what changes have been made to support the mental/emotional health of those currently defending the country, as well as that of their family members? Are they better prepared than during the Vietnam era?

Rick: I hear the propaganda (been hearing it since the early 90's) that claims it is a different day and that we are taking care of our people - I hear many vets and active duty people say otherwise. There are also many reports and looks at whether there are serious flaws in how we are attempting to supposedly care for people who have borne the battle. I think the spin and the lip service is better but I am not convinced that the actual help is any better thus far.

Juanita: How receptive were the contributors to your book when asked to write about their pain, and perspective? What was the experience like for them voicing their past?

Rick: Once I told the authors from the first edition they were all anxious to participate again in whatever way they could, those who missed the first edition jumped on this opportunity since they were not all ready the first time around to share. It is still hard for them to voice their most intimate feelings and thoughts but they think it worth the effort to help others - they especially were open when they found out the proceeds didn't go to any one person but rather a food bank.

Juanita: What a great idea Rick. Would you tell us more about your decision to contribute the book's proceeds to a food bank?

Rick: I have directed the proceeds to go to a foodbank because it keeps with the spirit of the majority of the vets I have worked with over the decades and it especially keeps with what most of the authors would want - especially the ones who have died. The proceeds go to the Lincolnshire Church of the Brethren which is my home church. I have spent the last few years on their compassion mission group that oversees those sorts of projects and I was aware of the needs that have increased over the last few years. The vets were especially happy to get on board once they knew the funds would not go in anyone's pockets. Vets are compassionate people because they have seen and experienced much tribulation in their lives and they are quick to reach out to others much of the time.

Juanita: Rick, this is a heavy subject for many readers, and will certainly be an informative and emotional journey for many. Why is it of such importance to hear about the personal thoughts and experiences of a war that was so long ago?

Rick: Because we are repeating many of the same mistakes today and probably will continue to do so in the future - we are slow learners we Americans when it comes to these types of situations - we as a people can no longer assume that war has no affect on people and I must say that vets are not the only ones affected - it touches almost every person in our society as it does in the society of our adversaries. If people understand that war is an ugly thing perhaps someday we can learn to get along and solve things before it leads us to killing and maiming.

Juanita: What insights will your book offer towards the current wars such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and the people involved?

Rick: I hope and the authors hope that people connected to these new situations will be helped by knowing they are not alone, they are not crazy and that there are others who have blazed a trail for them - some with their lives and we cannot and will not let their lives be wasted.

Juanita: Some of the stories you've compiled relate the experience of women in wartime. How did their experience differ from the men's, and how did they survive in such a male dominated atmosphere?

Rick: Women in Viet Nam on the American side were primarily utilized in medical or clerical roles. Typically they were supposed to be somewhat removed from harms way and protected by encirclements of men, etc. - it didn't always work that way. I don't think I can speak for women vets on this question.

Juanita: Rick, what are some of the standout stories in your book?

Rick: Charlie Knepple's writings are from a book he wrote to his family and friends so they might understand him better because he knew he had changed. Paul Richards's materials were often a place to put the pain and venom from his experiences in Viet Nam but also with family situations in the states during his two tours there with the marines. There are pieces written by fellows who considered themselves illiterate but when they speak from the heart they are quite eloquent. The story of Dwight Johnson the Medal of Honor winner from Detroit is especially poignant in how one we label a hero isn't able to bear the weight of such an award coupled with his experiences in combat and his experiences when he returned home.

Juanita: From the research you have done over the years, what is the general consensus of war veterans regarding using military conflict to deal with global problems?

Rick: I don't think there is a consensus among vets which is actually creating problems today for our country and our returning troops.

Juanita: Rick how can readers find out more about you and your book?

Rick: www.LovingHealing.com/MadeInAmerica, my email is sogfnginc@aol.com

Juanita: Thanks you for taking the time to talk with us today Rick. Your book, *Made In America, Sold in the Nam*, is a timely and necessary read, and we encourage everyone to look for it in their local book store or online booksellers. Do you have any last thoughts you'd like to share today?

Rick: I just hope that the new veterans that are coming home don't have to wait as long to get the help they need and deserve. It is important for vets to speak out and say it like it is so others will know unequivocally that they are not alone. It is a long shot but perhaps people will read these words and get the idea that we need to find another way than through war to relate to other people. We must become a people that develops the capacity to critically think instead of being so easily led down the path.