

The Two Faces of Roman Martinez

The exhibition revolves around the experience of three generations of combat veterans. I met Roman Martinez, a Vietnam veteran, in 1999 and interviewed him for another project. I was deeply touched by his story and at the same time quite troubled. I wanted to know more: Who was this man? He seemed to have two different personalities, two faces. A couple of days later I interviewed his wife Miriam Martinez. This was the start of a long series of visits and interviews during the following four years.

Roman Martinez comes from a Catholic working class background. As a boy and young man he was very active in his local church, singing in the choir and assisting the priest. The escalation of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s made him feel it was his duty to volunteer and help his country. He describes how he enlisted in January of 1969, but requested permission to serve as a chaplain's assistant and be exempted from bearing arms. The officers responsible for his assignment after basic training however decided to send him to a unit engaged in reconnaissance and Search and Destroy missions.

Roman Martinez is a good storyteller and there is a painful intensity to his description of the crisis he experienced when forced out on his first patrol, pressured by both officers and fellow members of his group. There he was witness to the cold-blooded execution of a group of Vietnamese who had surrendered and come out of the jungle with their hands raised. This proved a turning point for Roman Martinez who until then had considered himself a conscientious objector. He recalls performing a ceremony in which he "buried himself and his God". He hung his helmet on an M-16, considered himself dead, and could take whatever risks he chose from then on. Nothing mattered anymore. He developed a different personality and became known as Hopper, feared and admired in equal measure.

With five Bronze Stars to his name, Roman was wounded and transported home. It took several complicated operations to save his arm, torn apart by a hand grenade. Back home, he grew his hair long, dressed as a hippie and denied ever having been in Vietnam. Several years later he met Miriam, a colonel's daughter. She recognized in Roman the same nightmares that tormented her father as a result of his experiences in the Second World War and the Korean War. Roman could not hide from her what he had been through. Their domestic situation became increasingly difficult. Certain situations continuously triggered bouts of violence directed to Miriam and the children. Through therapy they slowly began to find keys to Roman's past and to his violent behavior. After several severe crises they slowly started to rebuild his – and their – life. But even now, over thirty years later, he is still on medication and needs regular therapy to cope with the past.

Once a week he takes part in a group therapy session together with 15 other veterans. Most of them are in their mid-eighties and fought in the Pacific during the Second World War, in places like Iwo Jima, Saipan and the Philippines. A couple of men participated in the Korea War and the rest in the Vietnam War. They have all experienced problems coping with normal life. I met the group after filming Roman for almost three years. I got to know them and was allowed to attend and film a couple of their sessions.

In September 2004 I visited Roman and Miriam Martinez and showed them a roughcut of a single screen version of the installation. They had not seen any of the material I had filmed during the last four years. It was a very moving occasion. They agreed to show the film version to the other men in the therapy group, which we did the next day. In the days following the screening I interviewed some of these men.

The exhibition comprises of a three-screen DVD installation with a running time of 40 minutes. This part of the exhibition relates Roman's story: how an altarboy and pacifist through psychological pressure and trauma becomes a ruthless combat soldier. Ready to kill. It also tells the story of his journey back. An important part of the exhibition is the interviews with the older veterans after they had seen the single screen film and other connected interviews. A reference library with thematically connected books completes the exhibition.

I'm grateful to all the combat veterans for generously sharing their experiences and memories. As a son of a World War II veteran I know how difficult that can be. The material for this installation was filmed in the US and all the veterans are Americans but I believe that their sentiments and experiences are universal.

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