

THE DRAFT

By Peter Snoad

Synopsis

A group of U.S. college students is about to leave on a study tour of Vietnam. As part of their preparation, the students have been assigned to interview older Americans who were impacted by the military draft during the Vietnam War over 50 years before. The interview process provides the dramatic framing for *The Draft*, which explores the tumult of the Vietnam era through the interwoven real-life stories of 10 young Americans – eight men and two women – whose lives were shaped and forever changed by the draft and the war, and by the moral and political choices they were compelled to make.

Three of the men – Al Miller, George Williams and John Bisbee – served in the military, saw combat as infantry soldiers in Vietnam, and struggled with trauma, substance abuse, and societal rejection after their return home. Two others, Frank Marotta and Roger Wallace, managed to evade conscription. Frank was exempted from service because of an old knee injury – with a fake X-ray provided by a sympathetic family doctor – and became a draft counselor; Roger received a student deferment, and was an anti-war activist and elementary school teacher. Two of the men resisted the draft: Tom Gardner dropped out of college to work full-time as a civil rights and anti-war organizer and gained conscientious objector status. Randy Kehler, also active in the anti-war movement, was jailed for refusing to co-operate with the draft system. Jay Holtzman, in training to be a psychiatrist, chose exile and spent three years in Canada before returning to the U.S. after the war under a clemency program.

Of the two women featured in *The Draft*, Penny Rock was an aspiring opera singer who joined the U.S. Army as a nurse to support herself financially, and worked in an intensive care unit at a military hospital in Vietnam. Diane Clancy, a student and activist, aided draft resisters and counseled returned vets with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Three of the characters in the play describe their experiences of visiting Vietnam since the “American War”, as the Vietnamese call it. Trinh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American student whose parents came to the U.S. as refugees, visits a center for victims of Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant used by the U.S. military that has left a devastating legacy of birth defects, genetic mutations, cancer, and other health problems for more than three million Vietnamese. Penny Rock visits the hospital where she had worked and finds it has been turned into a sweatshop. Frank Marotta goes as a tourist and is surprised by the lack of animosity towards Americans.

In the final scenes of the play, the characters reflect on the meaning of their experiences – for themselves, for young people today, and for our collective future.

The play is based primarily on the real-life stories told in “Called to Serve: Stories of Men and Women Confronted by the Vietnam War Draft” by Tom Weiner (www.calledtoservevietnam.com).