Interview – John Rowan, Nat'l President, VVA

"I am especially proud when young veterans tell me that if not for the VVA, they would still be getting screwed." (Photo: DNA Info/Olivia Scheck)

Born and bred in Queens, John Rowan *is the quintessential New Yorker, blunt and driven, especially when it comes to the needs of his fellow Vietnam veterans. Recently elected to his fourth two-year term as the national president of the 66,000-member Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), Rowan takes pride in the accomplishments of the Congressionally chartered veterans service organization, but isn't content to rest on his laurels. As Vietnam veterans get older, Rowan is determined to ensure they know the benefits to which they are entitled and how to get them. In a wide-ranging interview (available in its entirety here on the web), Rowan talks about his Vietnam experience, the birth of VVA and the organization's ongoing efforts on behalf of all veterans.*

Did you always intend to go into the service?

I attended Brooklyn Technical High School and was a good student until my senior year when I was a screw-up. After graduating, I went to a business college but dropped out after half a semester and went to work for ATT as a technician. Then in July 1965, with the draft breathing down my neck, I decided to join the Air Force.

How did you get to Vietnam?

When I went in, I aced all the tests and intended to go in as an electrician. Then, in typical military fashion, they asked me to take another test on language skills. The next thing I know is they offered me to become a linguist. They gave me a spiel, it sounded like an interesting thing to do. It was hysterical, because the only thing I actually failed in high school was French. So I got orders to Monterey, Calif., to study Indonesian. I didn't even know where the hell that was and had to look it up in the library. Surprise, Indonesia's the fifth largest country in the world!

Were you actually headed for Indonesia?
I studied the language for six months, then went to Texas for intel training. In the meantime, the Indonesian government crushed the Communist insurgency, killing about 3 million people in the process. Now I had nothing to do, so when they asked who wants to learn Vietnamese, I said sure.

So, you became a Vietnamese linguist?
After three months of Vietnamese training, they gave up on me and I was sent back to Texas. But, they were going to send me to Vietnam anyway. I was trained to work on a crypto machine flying in RC-130s. We started out doing 30-day rotations flying out of Da Nang. Then we were sent to Okinawa to establish the 6690th Security Squadron to fly RC-135s around China to the Tonkin Gulf and down the coast. Becoming a brand new squadron required us to create everything, our policies and procedures, from whole cloth, so I became something like a squadron clerk. We shared a building with the Strategic Air Command unit. We could go over to their side for briefings so we knew of every plane and mission that was going north—so we would know who the NVA were going after. They couldn't come over to our side, because everything we did was top secret. Hell, on the planes, the pilots couldn't even come out of the cockpit because of the sensitive nature of what we were doing.

What was the squadron's mission?
We were listening to anything coming off the ground. Any time a pilot in Hanoi took off, we knew who he was and what he was doing. To do that, we had to have linguists in Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian and Korean on board. Most of the enemy pilots were actually Korean because they had the most experience. The Russians mostly ran the surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. There were three components we monitored: radar sites, missile sites and the command sites. We'd sit out at 42,000 feet and you could hear anything; on clear days, we could even see up the Red River to Hanoi.

That is how we knew what the enemy pilots were up to and could figure out who they were going after, so we could give our pilots a heads up. We mostly flew in the Tonkin Gulf, but on occasion we flew along the border with Laos. Our main mission was to find SAM sites, but we also had guys in the back of the plane who had gear for radar signals to pinpoint just where they were. It was one of the real unsung tales of the war. I actually talked to some Russians who worked at the missile sites and they said we almost wiped them out, until LBJ ordered the bombing halt and that was the end of that. The North Vietnamese knew what was happening, but there was not much they could do about it short of sending someone out to get us. Sometimes we did have a fighter escort. Our missions were, compared to the grunts, relatively safe. Of course, when we were on the ground in Da Nang, we were vulnerable. I was there during an intense rocket attack one night. When I came out the next morning, I found a jet engine had come down right next to my bunker.

Your tour was cut short by a personal tragedy.
In December 1967 my father was diagnosed with lung cancer, and because I was the only child I was given a hardship discharge, otherwise I would have served until August 1969. Fortunately he lived for almost a year. I felt bad leaving early, and found the work to be very interesting.

You had a unique perspective as the war became most intense.
I actually suffered from information deprivation. It was strange. I'd read the papers and say, "Nah, that's wrong." For example, I remember reading one story about the U.S. bombing the Red River Valley dike system. I realized most Americans are thinking Hoover Dam, not just some mud pack dikes. Yes, we screwed things up for the Vietnamese, but they were out rebuilding the mud dike the next day. People didn't understand what was really going on there. That was the big fallacy of the war, we were fighting the war as we did against the Germans, instead of as against the Vietnamese.

Back home, your life went into a different direction.
Back in New York, I was working and taking care of my family situation. I had the GI Bill and realized I needed to get my butt back in school. I went to night classes for a year before I quit my job to go back full time at Queens College, where I got a B.A. in political science and then went straight through for a masters degree at Hunter College. I had really contemplated going back into the Air Force or possibly the National Security Agency, but in school I found other things. When I got out of college, I went to work for the Bronx borough president, then got a job with Congressman Ben Rosenthal doing his community relations work in the district. I did that for three years and got to Mayor Ed Koch. About that time, the city was creating its community boards to work with city government, and I became the first district manager of the Queens Community Board. I was there for nine years, interfacing with city officials and working on local planning and improvements. It was a nonelected position, but it really had a lot of clout. When the City Council created the Office of Oversight and Investigation in 1986, I became an investigator and later went to work in the Controllers office, overseeing contractors and procurement. After 26 years, the city offered an early retirement, so I was able to retire at 56 in 2002.

In the meantime, as you built a career, Vietnam was never far away.
It started when I went back to school in the fall of 1968, in the middle of antiwar movement. I took a poly science course from a professor who had been a colonel in the Reserves, had taught at the War College and thought the war really sucked, not necessarily from the political standpoint, but that it was being run badly and was a complete waste. I was also studying Asian history, geopolitics, and I began to meet other veterans at Queens College, which was a very liberal place. I became acquainted with Bobby Mueller and got involved with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. By then, I thought the war was really stupid, especially the bombing halt, and I thought we should get the hell out. I believed Richard Nixon when he said he would end the thing, then I got really pissed when he didn't.

What was it like in the VVAW?
Vietnam Veterans Against the War was very active in New York, but I found the politics got tedious. I later realized that many guys were left-wing maniacs—and FBI informants. I stayed with it until 1972, then went to work for George McGovern, because I thought, here's this WWII bomber pilot going against Nixon. For many in the VVAW, that was too mainstream. Ultimately, the McGovern campaign turned out to be a waste of time. There were a lot of guys who I had got to know in VVAW who were in the local colleges and I stayed in touch with them. In 1978, I was asked to serve on the board of directors of the Veterans Upgrade Center in Brooklyn, working on getting discharge upgrades. It was run by all Vietnam vets, including a couple of

lawyers. The intake guy was the best, he had a Silver Star and was black, which was important because most of the vets coming in were black.

Were there a lot of unfair discharges?
It was horrible what went on, the number of bad discharges. Guys were getting administrative discharges for offensives that, if they had been tried they would have received simply some disciplinary actions. We are talking bullshit discharges. Draftees with time left were often toast when they came home from Vietnam. The Army was happy to get rid of them, they didn't want them hanging around. The regular Army guys who maybe had a year or more to go, were pissed on. They were used to being dressed down and now were being told to be spit shined, salute everybody, be good soldiers, when all they really wanted was to go home. So, often the military would say, "OK, kid, sign this and you can go home." They were administrative discharges. Now, not only were they Vietnam vets, but they also had this bad paper hanging around their necks, often for only minor offenses. There were probably a half-million bad discharges during this time. So we had this program of vets helping vets get discharge upgrades, and we won 75 percent of our cases challenging their discharge status.

Was this a national program?
There were about 20 of these centers around the country, but they were independent of each other and locally staffed. One still survives in Rochester, N.Y., the Vet Outreach Center, which helps vets find jobs and housing and get counseling.

So the Veterans Upgrade Center kept you involved with veterans issues after the war?
I thought about Vietnam a lot, but after the war there was not much to do about it. It was hard to forget about, however, because of so many problems that followed for veterans, like drug addiction. I always tell people that I know more guys who died because of Vietnam after the war than in the war. Around 1980 the funding for the Upgrade Center changed and it morphed into more of a jobs program. That was really fun. We'd get these guys who'd been out hustling on the streets. If they didn't come in on time they'd throw them the hell out; if they looked like hell they'd send them back home. Basically either they would clean up their act to get some help or they wouldn't—we couldn't waste time with the wouldn'ts. By 1980, VVA was starting to pop. It was originally the Council of Vietnam Veterans, primarily a lobbying organization, before Mueller decided to turn it into a veterans service organization and started talking about creating local entities and growing the organization. In 1981 we created the Queens Chapter 32, and I became its first president. I did that for two years. We had our first national convention in 1983 to create the VVA as we know it today.

What characterized the original VVA members?
Most of us thought Vietnam veterans got screwed. For some, like me, we felt a bit of survivor guilt—we did OK but others didn't. Guys needed help.

What was it like at the beginning?
It was not always a good thing, as many guys were now talking about their experience for the first time, opening old wounds, sometimes freaking out their families who never really knew what they went through. It caused a lot of stress, a number of divorces. One guy in Poughkeepsie went off the deep end, killed himself.

Did the VVAW background of many VVA founders taint the organization?
There is no question a lot of early guys were involved in VVAW. Some people didn't like it, some didn't know, some didn't care. But by then VVAW was moribund. The politics was getting off the rails, the war was over and most of us were gone from the organization long before that. But the driving force was to get help for the vets, bringing guys together.

So, why didn't you just join up with the American Legion or VFW?
When I was working for Congressman Rosenthal, I joined the American Legion, and at my second meeting they wanted to make me vice commander. I did join the Catholic War Veterans. They had a very active post in a nearby neighborhood, a very Catholic community. In 1976 I was the first Vietnam vet to become post commander. It is really hysterical. You can go there today and see all the commanders' pictures hanging on the walls. They have all these black-and-white photos of nice clean-cut guys, in their little hats. Mine is the first color photo, me with long hair, a big bushy red beard, no tie, a hat barely sitting on my head. It was an obvious demarcation point. They were very conservative, but I got them information and got them involved in things, like opening the post for vets to get help once a week. They thought I was crazy, but they liked me.

The VVA Founding Principles takes a pretty sharp jab at the other veteran organizations.
Yeah. It pokes them in the eye a bit. I know we've gotten some harsh responses over the years as a result, but my feeling is tough shit, it was true. I'm a life member of Disabled American Veterans. They never wanted to hear about PTSD, mental health issues. Agent Orange? Didn't want to hear about that chemical stuff. I've come to the conclusion there was a real generational divide. They were our fathers, we were their sons. We were the hippie freaks, smoking pot instead of getting drunk. Old Joe getting drunk all day at the bar on 10-cent beers, that was OK, but little Johnny running with his friends smoking pot, that was not OK. They had the crewcuts, we had the long hair. And then talking about mental health? Forget about it. The big difference, of course, was drugs. I had a bunch of friends who ended up in the war and after we all came back, we were into music and stuff, hanging out, talking about and sharing our experiences. We didn't know we were having "rap sessions," but that got a lot of them through it. World War II guys didn't understand any of that.

What's been the VVA's greatest breakthrough accomplishment to date?
Undoubtedly prevailing in the Agent Orange battles, going back to the original law in 1991 to last year's addition of ischemic heart disease to the VA list of presumptive diseases. Agent Orange has killed and is continuing to kill a lot of us. It was very important that we could get the disability payments for these diseases. Still, there are so many widows who should be getting compensation but don't even know about it.

Then there is the whole issue of PTSD. We helped get people to understand what it is. It used to be called Post Vietnam Syndrome but we know now it affects not just combat veterans, but anybody who goes through traumatic experience. We were the only ones willing to challenge the VA on this and keep the research going. And, I'm very proud of the fact that we played a big part in rehabilitating the prestige of Vietnam veterans.

What were your greatest disappointments?
No question, we would have liked to have gotten people to listen to us on Agent Orange and PTSD 10 years earlier than we did. We could have saved lives. The other great disappointment is the lack of help from past veterans. They should have known better. But I'm very proud of what we've done and feel especially proud when I meet young veterans who tell me that, if not for us, they would still be getting screwed. We can be particularly proud that we have changed the dynamic.

Things are better, of course, but do you see similar challenges facing the new veterans to those that Vietnam vets faced?
There are still crazy things going on, a lot of bullshit discharges. We are working with Yale Law School on new personality disorder discharges.

Were you surprised at the early resistance to recognition of PTSD in the Iraq and Afghan War veterans?
Yeah, it was tough it out and go back. The military needs the bodies, especially in this war, so they can't have them flaking out on them, it's sad. PTSD is a funny thing, some get it, some don't. It is especially hard on the Guard and Reserve.

We are understanding that PTSD can still arise in guys for the first time 40 years after their combat. Delayed PTSD is a big issue now emerging as Vietnam veterans retire and all this crap they had bottled up comes back to haunt them. A lot of guys are now having these issues, and we need to get them into treatment. I do give the VA credit for its suicide outreach, at least they are trying. And the veterans court stuff can go a long way to save a lot of people and a lot of heartache by identifying the problems and nipping the criminal behavior in the bud when they are doing small stuff.

Given there were some 8 million who served during the era and 2 to 3 million in Vietnam, are you disappointed with the organization's size?
No, as we've probably had some 400,000 veterans come through as members. We are an activist organization, not so much a social club. We don't allow drinking at meetings. While we would love to have more members—and we are growing—we are very happy with the people we have as members. We believe they are the best-informed members of all the veterans' organizations. What we do is more important than size of membership. We have 66,000 members and are actually growing steadily, about six percent per year. As vets retire, they have some time, want to reflect and get in touch with people. Florida chapters are growing fast, especially in the big retirement communities. On the other hand, we see some chapters dying on the vine.

What is the Veterans Health Council, the newest VVA initiative?
It is the biggest thing we are doing now, bringing together experts from academia, advocacy organizations, health institutions and pharmaceutical companies to discuss health issues related to veterans. At our web site, vets can find all the presumptive diseases for each war. It kills me that so many do not know that they qualify for compensation, for example, for diabetes or prostate cancer. They can be a big disability rating resulting in giving veterans health care and payments they deserve. Probably 75 percent of Vietnam vets do not go to the VA for health care and more than that do not belong to a veterans service organization. So most Vietnam vets don't

have a clue and that's why we are trying so hard to do outreach. That includes training the health care community, so they understand how vets fit in. For example, we're working with the Lung Cancer Alliance, which did not even know that lung cancer is an automatic presumptive for Vietnam Veterans. We are doing that with other groups, like the Men's Health Network and getting articles into medical journals. The problem is the VA doesn't really get this information out as well as it should. And we are trying to create more relationships with nonveteran organizations, such as the NRA. We recently met with the NRA Veterans/Military Committee, chaired by Oliver North, to talk about the Veterans Health Council. In the meeting, North said: "I belong the VVA and read about getting a PSA test. I went, proved positive, got diagnosed and got treated. They saved my life."

Do you see improvements at the VA?
Eric Shinseki is one of best secretaries of Veteran Affairs we've ever had. When the ischemic heart disease got listed, Office of Management and Budget was having fits, and crap started coming up in Congress about how expensive this stuff is. But Shinseki pushed it. Unfortunately he has to deal with an entrenched bureaucracy. But all this anti-government stuff is frustrating. I'm not saying the government doesn't do stupid things—I've seen it firsthand—but it can give incentives. The WWII GI bill is one of the best examples, and the money spent was multiplied a hundred fold. I remember doing a background check on a guy who came out of a poor neighborhood, was just average in school, got out of the service in 1944, went back to college on the GI bill and went on to become an engineering pioneer in construction. He got his chance with the GI bill.

And the Vietnam vets' GI Bill didn't stack up?
Our GI Bill sucked. Vietnam was the first truly integrated U.S. military and we brought in huge numbers of poor and minorities. Think of it, had we had a GI Bill like in WWII, we could have totally changed the lives of millions and perhaps whole communities.

Are you concerned about the talk of massive budget cuts?
We are concerned about any attempts to cut veteran benefits. Now Tricare has become a subject again. That was part of the deal, and now it's, "Oh we didn't really mean it." Come on, this society owes it to the one percent who serve—and they aren't the same people as the one percent at the top.

What should Vietnam veterans do to protect their rights, in addition to joining VVA?
I just wish they would all start to speak out more. The leaders of most veteran organizations are pretty united on these issues and do a good job in holding Congress' feet to the fire. Regarding the budget stuff, we are trying our best, but will only see when the dust settles. But our individual members and nonmember veterans need to make their voices heard.