

He fought for our country, then battled for dignity and justice for its veterans

Description

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Michael Blecker joined the army in 1967 to get out of Reading, Pa.

â??Our generationâ??s model of manhood was the early John Wayne war movies: Wayne never flinched and always won, thatâ??s what we wanted. Plus the GI Bill made the Army very attractive.â?•

Nine years later, as a law student at the activist New College of California School of Law, he started an internship at the newly founded Swords to Plowshares. He never left, and in 1982 was appointed executive director. Blecker, 69, has always been mission-driven.



Michael Blecker with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Veteransâ?? Day in 2012.

He also co-founded the California Association of Veterans Service Agencies and was one of the founders of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. Whether recounting stories from Swordsâ?? early days or the continuing struggles of Vietnam veterans and the veterans of the post-9/11 wars, he is a tireless advocate for justice and dignity for the countryâ??s veterans.

â??War causes wounds and suffering that last beyond the battlefield,â?• he said. â??The question remains: how do you care for those who served?â?•

Blecker is being honored with the 2019 Norma Satten Community Service Innovation Award, which will be bestowed on Sept. 26 by the San Francisco Community Living Campaign, a nonprofit that advocates for seniors and people with disabilities. Satten was its first board president and a tireless leader for aging with human rights and dignity.

By the end of the Vietnam War, 250,000 veterans had received undesirable, bad conduct, or dishonorable discharges, many after serving a full combat tour before running afoul of military discipline back home. Their reasons for desertion were many: the increasing unpopularity of the war back home, family commitments, problems readjusting to military discipline stateside, make-work assignments back in the states, and what came to be known as post traumatic stress disorder.

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Bucking â??bad paperâ??

â??Bad paperâ?• not only stripped veterans of their honor, Blecker said, but denied them healthcare and other military benefits, barred them from employment opportunities, occupational licenses and welfare benefits, and led many into a hopeless, downward spiral.

The attorneys and interns at Swords & Plowshares were among the first to challenge bad paper.

â??We argued they should receive credit for their service prior to their assignment statewide,â??â?? Blecker said, and that the VA should accept claims for â??invisible woundsâ?• â?? now commonly referred to as post traumatic stress. While the VA had no trouble addressing visible wounds, when confronted by large numbers of veterans claiming traumas due to their war experience, they insisted on attributing these problems to early character deficiencies.



Michael Blecker talking with a Vietnamese boy.

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But first, Swords had to fight for the right to represent veterans at benefits hearings, a right reserved for long-established veterans organizations. In 1978, Swords became the first organization in 32 years to be certified by the VA to represent veterans seeking benefits.

In 1979, Blecker won one of the first cases at the Board of Veteran Appeals for post-traumatic stress disorder compensation, paving the way for doctors to get compensated for serving veterans with PTSD.

Advocating for the right to represent veterans and the inclusion of PTSD as a treatable condition were only two of the many issues Swords confronted during Bleckerâ??s years with the organization.

In 1980, 40 percent of the homeless men in San Francisco and other major cities were veterans. Then-Mayor Dianne Feinstein appointed Blecker to serve on her Task Force on Homelessness. â??We thought the problem could probably be solved in a year and a half,â?•

The problem that never ends

Instead, it continues to occupy much of Bleckerâ??s time.

â??Veterans are disproportionately represented among the homeless population and many more struggle with poverty, substance abuse and mental illness at much higher rates than their civilian peers,â?• he said. â??I wish more people understood that war causes wounds and suffering that last beyond the battlefield.â?•

In 1988, Swords opened its first transitional housing program in the Tenderloin. Last year, Swords housed more than 400 veterans in one of its permanent supportive housing units, with additional projects soon to open. An additional several hundred veterans with disabilities and mental health needs also took advantage of Swordsâ?? transitional housing programs.

In addition last year, more than 3,000 police, clinicians, mental health providers, educators, and employers participated in Swordsâ?? Combat to Community cultural competency training program.

While Vietnam veterans are now seniors â?? 74 percent of those served by Swords in 2018 were over 55 â?? it was Dignity Fund Coalition organizers who brought Swords into the community of senior-serving agencies and advocates.

â??The Dignity Fund Coalition wanted to build the broadest, most inclusive base of support, including seniors, adults with disabilities, those living with HIV/AIDS, and veterans,â?• said Tony Fazio, a civic consultant and leader of the 2016 campaign for Proposition I, which established ongoing funding and support for programs serving seniors and people with disabilities.

Swords is now a member of the Dignity Fund Coalition, and receives funding from the San Francisco Department of Aging and Adult Services.

War makes it hard to be a good person

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Bleckerâ??s start in the working world began when he was 11, delivering papers. The paper route was followed by a long list of jobs in diners and fast-food restaurants, the Boys Club, and finally Ludenâ??s, the cough drops company and Readingâ??s largest employer. â??For months, my co-workers would talk about the yearly picnic spread donated by Ludenâ??s. They were counting the days up to the spread. I knew that was not for me. The military offered me a way out.â??

Blecker served in the 101st division, a basic infantry unit. â??Iâ??m fortunate my combat experience wasnâ??t so traumatic, though my wife says I didnâ??t get away unharmed. Youâ??re armed to the teeth; youâ??ve got the power to call in all kinds of Special Forces. Youâ??re enduring heat, elephant grass and leeches. Thatâ??s what war is. It makes it hard to be a good person, a parent, husband, employee when you get out.â?•



After serving in the military for 31 months, Blecker moved to San Bernadino where he attended community college for two years. â??I received $320 a month in benefits. My rent was $40 a month; gas was 20 cents a gallon. You could get by on $320.â?•

He then transferred to the University of California-Berkeley, where he received a bachelorâ??s degree before entering law school at the New College of San Francisco.

Blecker and his wife, who works in the trauma recovery unit at San Francisco General Hospital, have two children. Their oldest daughter is just starting a job teaching early childhood education at New York University. Their son is a senior in filmmaking at the University of Southern California. â??Now that the children are out of the house, weâ??re trying to figure out whatâ??s next.â?•

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