

## **Deconstructing Vietnam and ROTC**

**Brendan McNerney**

*“They were challenging times.”  
LMU Alumnus Chad Dreier*

Mention ROTC to anyone on campus these days and you'll probably get a fairly laconic response in the vein of “Those guys that march on Fridays?” Today, ROTC is a prevalent force on campus and at the same time, largely absent from the mind of the average student. The marching students in rank and file Air Force fatigues have a surprising way of blending into each student's hectic lifestyle and they seem to be as much a fixture on campus as the bell tower of Sacred Heart Chapel. This current state-of-affairs stands in marked contrast to an earlier time in LMU's history when the ROTC was mandatory, requiring a two year commitment from every able-bodied male student. And during the late 1960s and early 1970s, this proud military organization took center stage on campus as the turmoil of the Vietnam-era created uncertainty and confusion. Ultimately, what would arise out of this tumultuous period was not chaos but clarity: the organization found its focus, became voluntary, and solidified its place on the increasingly diverse and modern campus of LMU.

Under the direction of then President, Father Whelan, the LMU branch of ROTC began on campus following World War II. Its roots extended much earlier, though, to another wartorn period of American History. It was in the middle of fighting World War I that President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Defense Act of 1916 into law, which officially created ROTC for the purpose of training and recruiting youths into the military. Since its inception and likely due to the atmosphere during the time of its formation, the program had always had a compulsory 2-year admission for all college males while on campus. There were many financial aid packages for students who were involved with the program, often full-ride scholarships, and those who participated in these payment programs committed to four years of service after graduating. Perhaps because of this monetary incentive, the mandatory nature of the program proved to be a nonissue.

And then, the Vietnam War changed everything. In the mid-1960s, the United States began to escalate its military involvement in Vietnam; within a few short years, a significant number of Americans were opposing the war. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, college campuses throughout the nation were wracked by anti-war demonstrations. In the year 1968 alone, 3 out of every 4 college campuses nation-wide experienced some form of student activism. LMU was no exception to this trend. As a member of ROTC during the late 1960's, LMU Alumnus Chad Dreier saw the tumult on campus first-hand. “Almost every day there would be student speakers about anti-war or burning their draft card . . .” As Dreier summarized, “They were challenging times.” Indeed, they were. The anti-war movement was in full swing and it seemed that if you weren't against it, then you were at least afraid to be in it. Vietnam was the looming threat and ROTC was increasingly connected to the war.

When recounting his experiences from the turbulent period in American history, Dreier recalled how difficult the protests could be on ROTC members: “I think part of the problem, and it's different now, because now people can be against the government and for the military.

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They're not anti the soldiers, but anti the policies. In those days, they took it out on the soldiers. That was just tough." ROTC often marched on the soccer field in clear view of all the students coming and going from campus, so there was a constant sense of exposure for protesting. Dreier even remembered at one point having blood hurled on him as an indictment of soldiers who were being blamed for the conflict abroad. "One of the things you learned," Dreier noted, "was just to gut it out and be tough."

Amidst the turmoil of the Vietnam era, people tended to presume that soldiers, or ROTC members, could not be anti-war and still be affiliated with the military. LMU alumnus Mike Steed, who graduated in 1971, witnessed this confusion first-hand. He felt that the protests should have been against those in Washington, not the members of the ROTC:

"It should have been a continued and ongoing focus on the politicians that were making the decision to go [to Vietnam]. It was very interesting, on the one hand you could protest the political policies that were made in Washington to go to war, and on the other hand you could support your country by realizing that the men and women in the Armed Forces don't make those decisions, it's the politicians."

Steed carried this sentiment into his direct dealings with the protestors. If he heard of plans to organize a protest against the ROTC, he would approach student government and explain that the sentiments were misguided and that such attacks would only hurt the ROTC members who had nothing to do with the much-hated war policy. As Steed noted, "I'd say, after all I'm a member of ROTC, and I'm against the war." This conundrum was not lost on the women of the campus either. Katherine Moret, an LMU student at the time, commented that for many ROTC members, "...it was financial. They couldn't be here unless it was going to pay for their education... I don't think they wanted to [go to Vietnam]."

Ironically, ROTC also provided a temporary safe-haven for students. As luck would have it, Chad Dreier would become involved in ROTC right around the time of its two-year deferment program. This turned out to be a blessing as his draft number practically guaranteed him a seat on the next Antonov jet to the Da Nang province. As Dreier noted, "They had the draft lottery in those days, and I had high draft numbers, so I knew I was going in the service. Basically I stayed in ROTC." LMU Alumnus Mike Steed explained the relationship between the draft and ROTC. When numbers were pulled, "if you were in that level that night you started packing, because you knew you'd be drafted. It was that immediate, and that direct." But ROTC could provide asylum. As Steed recalled: "...one of the deferments was that if you were an active member of ROTC then you could be deferred to finish your college education, so long as you finished all of the ROTC classes and became an officer in the Air Force." Being sworn in and given to the reserves could be the difference between life in America and death abroad.

Thus far the discussion has focused on the ROTC and Vietnam. But as Mike Steed asked of the student government at the time, so should this exploration honor the ROTC independent of its political history. In fact, many students had positive experiences with the organization. LMU Alumnus Brian Quinn commented on how ROTC shaped him with its rigorous sense of order:

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“It was good discipline... I mean, you know, having to have your shoes shined and wear a uniform and everything.” Quinn, who attended LMU in the early 1960s before American involvement in Vietnam escalated, noted that ROTC involvement was not at all intrusive, but that the weekly march and the sense of authority was integral in helping the young men enrolled in the program.

The effect wasn't lost on Mike Steed either, who explained what it was like to go down to a Florida base: “We got sent one summer for six weeks to - I think I was sent to the Eglin Air Force Base, in Pan Handle, Florida, a big Air Force base, to do training. You learned what the men and women in the Armed Forces had to go through in order to protect America.” The sense of honor was palpable and it was an experience exclusive to those involved in the program. The protestors and naysayers external to ROTC could never fully grasp the sense of responsibility and duty that it took to join the Armed Forces, especially in a time ripe with political division and social unrest.

ROTC not only formed men at the time, it also built relationships. Though he participated in the 1950s, LMU Alumnus Bill Grisby served his two mandatory years in ROTC and spent an additional five years in the service. Upon leaving the service, he married his wife who was an Air Force nurse from Wisconsin. Coming from California and living worlds apart, ROTC managed to bring them into contact during their service and start a marriage that lasts to this very day.

Though Vietnam proved to be the most revolutionary period for the organization, resulting in the newer voluntary model, ROTC continues to move and grow in new ways. As recently as December 22, 2010, the controversial policy of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” from the 1990s requiring military employees to hide their sexual orientation was overturned when President Obama signed the repeal bill into law. The process will take a year to fully implement but its effects will reverberate within ROTC throughout the intervening time. The change stands as a testament to the power of protest that shaped the 1960s and 1970s and now marks the modern age. The issues change and ROTC adapts but one thing is certain: ROTC remains.

Hailing from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, ROTC has remained a prevalent force on campuses throughout the nation. Surviving both eras of peace and times of great political and social strain, the organization continues to shape young men and women into the soldiers of our nation. Even as the present day rolls around and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan provoke controversy and disagreement, ROTC members get up every day before the sun has risen, put on their fatigues or gym shorts, and line up voluntarily for an organization that once demanded their admission. The voluntary nature of the program has not changed its essence: an understanding of the necessity of having a guard for our borders and recognition of the extreme level of commitment it takes to offer oneself up for service to God and country.

So the next time you spot a group of ROTC members filling the Friday morning air with their shouts and carrying flags, remember that what they're really carrying isn't a pole and some

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fabric but an LMU legacy spanning over 50 years, one which marks the lives of many generations, past, present, and future.