

Reconstructing the Last Patrol

On August 22, 1972, a group of twelve thousand Vietnam Veterans Against the War lined up for a Silent March in Miami Beach, Florida. They formed platoon-like neat rows of four, with three disabled vets in wheelchairs taking the lead. Some of the veterans had come three thousand miles in long convoys for this moment in the Miami sun, a chance to tell their commander-in-chief that his Vietnam War policy was wrong (Truscott 1972a).



The Silent March.
Photo Courtesy of VVAW.

They left the VVAW campground in Flamingo Park and marched the four miles up Collins Avenue, a six-lane boulevard through the heart of the hotel district and a Jewish retirement community. Their

goal was the Hotel Fontainebleau, Republican convention headquarters (Truscott 1972a; Thompson 1973, 387-88). The vets wore battle fatigues, helmets, and combat boots. Some were on crutches and a few carried full-size plastic M-16s (Thompson 1973, 387; Vonnegut 1972). By all accounts of both observers and participants, the march had an eerie silence to it, punctuated only by the thump of leather on asphalt and the rattling of an open canteen top. All the “stop, start,” “fast, slow,” and “right, left” commands were given as hand signals of platoon leaders walking to the side of the main column (Thompson 1973, 387).

Miami Beach’s senior citizens watched tight-lipped as the marchers passed before their hotel porches (Thompson 1973, 387). A few onlookers cheered, and one or two saluted (Truscott 1972b). The Republican delegates, five hundred heavily-armed police, and the shipboard partiers on the *Wild Rose of Houston* at a nearby marina, all accustomed to noisy encounters with other protesters, stood silent as the vets approached (Thompson 1973, 388; Camp, 1972; Markowitz and Camp 1972). The platoon leaders directed the marchers into a tight semicircle, blocking all three northbound lanes of Collins Avenue. For five tension-filled minutes, the two groups stared at each other, the police clearly off balance. One of the VVAW platoon leaders then spoke through a bullhorn, “We want to come inside” (Thompson 1973, 388).

Conflict was avoided when Rep. Pete McCloskey, a Republican from California, shoved his way through the police line. McCloskey arranged a meeting between a few VVAW leaders and the Republican liaison with hotel management, the only Republican leader the vets would get to see. The vets assured McCloskey that they didn’t want to charge the hotel; they only wanted to be turned away in front of the nation’s press and TV cameras (Thompson 1973, 390; Valentine and Taylor 1972; Associated Press 1972b).

McCloskey and a few VVAW leaders addressed the crowd, which became increasingly difficult because two Army helicopters now hovered overhead. The only one who could be heard above the din was an ex-Marine sergeant from San Diego, Ron Kovic, one of the wheelchair-bound vets (Thompson 1973, 392). He spoke in a hoarse holler, frequently interrupted by cheers:

And we're smelly, and we're a little dirty now, but it's for a reason: because for the last week and a half we have traveled from across the United States of America, because we feel it is our obligation to tell the American people that these people are liars. . . . You have lied to us too long, Mr. President. Too many babies have been burned. Too many lives have been lost. You might have taken our bodies, but you have not taken our minds. (Truscott 1972a)

This account of the Silent March was pieced together through the reports of observers and a handful of nontraditional journalists working for alternative publications. As mentioned earlier, network TV news coverage of the Last Patrol was minimal. Only CBS and ABC covered the event, and they spent most of their time on the Yippies, Zippies, and other protesters and only a few seconds on the antiwar veterans.

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., covering the convention for *Harper's*, correctly anticipated the dearth of news coverage:

If the police don't act immediately, and if the humanitarians behave in a manner that is dignified or beautiful or heart-breaking, there is still something nice people can do.

They can ignore the humanitarians.

This is what the nice people did when one of the most honorable military reviews in American history took place on the afternoon of August 22, 1972, in front of the Hotel Fontainebleau. This date will not go down in history, because nice people do not want it there. (Vonnegut 1972)

The Silent March was the climax of the Last Patrol, but certainly not the only newsworthy portion. However, other Last Patrol events captured relatively little news attention, press or broadcast, relative to what had happened barely more than a year earlier during Dewey Canyon III.

Most Last Patrol events did not require much digging by the press. The Last Patrol's plans included a number of press opportunities as well as visually striking and tense confrontations that should have brought news attention. The eastern branch of the Last Patrol passed through Boston and New York and camped one night on the suburban outskirts of Washington, D.C. (Huth 1972; "Large Auto Convoy" *New York Times*, July 30, 1972).

Later, the patrol leafleted Fort Bragg, North Carolina, revealing their peaceful intentions to the two thousand riot-trained soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division, who would later confront them in Miami Beach (Nordheimer 1972a).

The eastern branch met the midwestern branch in Fort Pierce, Florida. Concerned about snakes in the swampy terrain, some of the vets slept on the hoods of their cars (Zastrow 1984).

About thirty vets at Fort Pierce set out on a March Against Murder, walking seventeen or eighteen miles a day to Miami Beach. More vets and other supporters joined them along the way. When the group reached Miami Beach, 137 miles later, they numbered 65 walkers and 285 in trailing vehicles (United Press International 1972c).

The western branches started from Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The Portland and San Francisco groups met in Salt Lake City. The Los Angeles group passed through Houston, camped in Louisiana, and met the other western branches in Georgia (Kovic 1976, 158, 161; “Large Auto Convoy” *New York Times* July 30, 1972).

The first wave of the patrol, a caravan of 130 cars, buses, trucks, and jeeps, many sporting flowers and peace signs, rolled over the bridge leading into Miami Beach with horns blowing, headlights burning, and flags waving. The caravan stretched for a mile and a quarter. The vets drove through every red light and stop sign on the way, shouting to the well-wishers who greeted them. Yippies and Zippies hugged them and dumped handfuls of joints into their cars (Kovic 1976, 160-161; Lindquist 1984; Davis 1984; Zastrow 1984). Another forty-five vehicles, part of the western branch held up by a series of uneventful weapons checks, rolled into town a few hours later to a similar reception, with the March Against Murder arriving moments after that (Lindquist 1984).



The Last Patrol's arrival in Miami.
Photo courtesy of VVAW.

The vets in the first part of the convoy looked at the main Flamingo Park campsite, a walled-in stretch of grass already occupied by other demonstrators, and instantly moved to maintain VVAW identity. They established their camp a quarter-mile south in a corner of the park secluded by tall hedges. One vet said their deployment was “just like a perimeter back in Nam” (Truscott 1972a).

The Last Patrol’s first hours in Flamingo Park were marred by violence. A group of twenty-two American Nazis had forced Carol Kitchens of the Miami Women’s Coalition from a low truckbed that served as a speaker’s platform. They tore the microphone from her and shoved her to the edge of the stage. A few minutes later, fights erupted between the Nazis and forty VVAW members in a human corridor who were trying to keep other members of the crowd from mobbing the Nazis. The two-minute fist fight injured seven Nazis, four vets, and two CBS cameramen before the VVAW established order in the area (Winfrey 1972; Associated Press Wirephoto 1972a; Baxter 1972; Baxter and Camp 1972; Zastrow 1984; Lindquist 1984).

Later, some elderly Jewish residents of the community came to Flamingo Park to say thanks to the veterans. After the fight, the vets realized the need to maintain security from counter-demonstrators and FBI infiltrators. The VVAW earned praise from the police for forming “human walls” to separate the angry groups. Using elaborate walkie-talkie communication, VVAW patrols also provided escorts for female demonstrators and turned in dope dealers and the holder of a private cache of arms (Zastrow 1984; Cunningham 1972; Wheat 1972; Bellows 1972).

The VVAW planned one protest activity per day. On Monday, August 21, while the delegates took care of convention business, the VVAW marched on Miami Beach High School where a thousand National Guardsmen were headquartered (Associated Press 1972h). The vets chanted to the beat of a drum, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Tricky Dick has got to go,” and “One, two, three, four; we don’t want your racist

war.” In the 85-degree heat, several barefoot vets walked gingerly on the asphalt (Dillin 1972a; Associated Press 1972j; Kifner 1972a).

National Guard officers ordered the shades and curtains drawn inside the high school, so few guardsmen saw all of the “guerilla theatre” depicting a guardsman defecting to the VVAW. A few guardsmen sneaked a peek, grinned, and flashed a peace sign or obscure gesture. Some vets tried to climb to the flat roof of the two-story building, but after a brief scuffle, retreated from the helmeted, flak-jacketed guardsmen. Seven of the vets tried to climb up again and were arrested (Baxter 1972; Associated Press 1972k; Zastrow 1984).

On Tuesday, the Silent March occurred, followed by a democratic and seemingly interminable VVAW meeting, chaired by Peter Zastrow, about what to do Wednesday, the evening Richard Nixon would accept his party’s nomination. Some VVAW members joined the protest outside Convention Hall; others went to Gainesville and Tallahassee to protest (B. Davis 1984; Zastrow 1984; Elder 1972a).

Ron Kovic, however, had gotten into Convention Hall on the press pass of a TV producer from California. Kovic worked his way to the front of the hall only to scuffle with convention security workers. The scuffle drew the attention of CBS’s Roger Mudd, who interviewed Kovic live for about two minutes—enraging White House Press Secretary Ron Ziegler (Kovic 1976, 164-166; Barrett 1973).

Kovic then found fellow wheelchair-bound vets Bobby Wheeler and Bill Wieman, who had obtained passes from Congressman McCloskey. They locked their wheelchairs and waited for the right moment (Kovic 1976, 166). Nixon was five minutes into his acceptance speech when the three vets began shouting, “Stop the bombing! Stop the war!” (Quinn 1972). Angry delegates screamed and spat on them. Security guards wheeled them to a side door, locking the veterans outside and the reporters inside the hall. The vets hugged each other and cried (Kovic 1976, 168; “Antiwar Veterans” *Miami Herald*, August 24, 1972).

Highlights

The story of one of the most dramatic VVAW events, the Last Patrol's Silent March to the 1972 Republican National Convention site, had to be reconstructed not from major media coverage, but from the accounts of participants and a handful of observers from alternate media outlets.

News media seemed to revert to VVAW coverage patterns more reminiscent of events before Dewey Canyon III. Most events received little attention outside of the local newspaper. VVAW stayed non-violent and kept its own identity, but journalists took the course of least resistance by lumping them together with Yippies and Zippies in "last gasp of war protest" stories.