

## Prisoner of conscience

*Charlie Liteky has made the strange sojourn from priest to war hero to human rights activist.*

**By Melinda Welsh**

**The loudspeaker crackles on and the call goes out** across the prison yard for inmate No. 83276-020 to report to the administration building. Within minutes, a lanky man in khakis with white hair and clear blue eyes enters the interrogation room. The prisoner is tanned and wears an unexpected beard. He has the large hands of a working man--powerful and full of intent.



Photo By Nell Campbell  
*Judy, seen here with her husband in the Lompoc Visitor Center, makes the day-long trek to visit Charlie in prison about once a month.*

The door is closed behind him and locked from the outside. A guard peeks in from an adjacent room through a glassed-in security window. The federal prisoner asks at once if the warden will “monitor” the interview as anticipated and advises a reporter that, if so, he intends to object because this would constitute a violation of First Amendment rights. The prisoner, ever ready to do battle for what he believes is a just cause, readies for a confrontation with the warden.

But when his keeper shows no interest in witnessing the session, the prisoner’s tension is released and he takes a deep breath. “In truth,” he says, “life in this level of security is not much worse than military boot camp.”

Charlie Liteky should know. He is now serving a one-year prison term in Lompoc Federal Prison near San Luis Obispo after being arrested for leading nonviolent protests against a Pentagon-funded school he claims violates the human rights of poor people in Latin America. And Liteky is certainly no stranger to the military. He did two tours of duty in Vietnam as an army chaplain and, for an exceptional act of valor, was awarded this country’s highest medal.

“I’m trying to help create a nonviolent world and to do so a person must face violence ... and death if necessary,” writes the ex-priest in a prison diary that is read on-line by tens of thousands of religious people and peace activists across the country, including many here in Sacramento. It is no surprise to find Liteky’s journal writings full of references to Gandhi and Martin Luther King--both of whom died fighting for justice and standing up for the poor, no matter what the personal consequences.

Liteky pens the diary entries while standing on a creaky metal folding chair in his cell, leaning across a bunk bed that serves for now as his desk. He doesn’t have it too bad at Lompoc. He lives in the “minimum security” section and gets along with most of the men. There are 300 of them here, crammed into two warehouse-like buildings. “I liken it to submarine living,” says Liteky, who turned 70 years old in prison back in February. Thanks to the diary, Liteky remains active in the cause, able to communicate his thoughts and experiences despite his prison locale.

“Charlie is my hero,” gushes Sacramento’s Barbara Wiedner, a lifelong peace activist and friend of Liteky’s who sends him books and corresponds with him regularly in prison. “He has proven with his life that he is a hero.”

Still, in Liteky’s presence, one can’t help but wonder what the word “hero” means and whether the word “crazy” might be a more accurate way to describe this man for his seeming willingness to do anything, including risk his life, for what he perceives to be a just cause. And for choosing, through his actions, to

spend so much time in prison among criminals and convicts instead of out in the free world, sharing his passions with wife and friends. After one of his arrests for civil disobedience, a government prosecutor questioned Liteky about his life's choices and remarked on his tendency to take the protesting "too far." One can't help but wonder, however, if Charlie Liteky has yet taken things as far as he intends.

The dense jungle of the Bien Hoa Province in 1967 sets the stage for an exploration of how this man turns his beliefs into action.

**The air was thick that winter** morning near Phuoc-Lac, 35 miles northeast of Saigon. The Vietnam War was heating up and Chaplain Liteky and other members of the U.S. Army's 199th Light Infantry Brigade set out early on patrol and tramped through mud and brush on a mission to check out a mortar site.

Suddenly everything exploded. The brigade marched unknowingly into the edge of a Viet Cong battalion whose 500 men were so well dug in as to be invisible. "They stunned us," says Liteky. "Nobody knew they were there."

The enemy opened machine gun and rocket fire on the leading 15 men in Liteky's group and almost every one of them went down. A few died immediately, but most did not. The shock arrived, the pain moved in. Blood streamed from the men's chests, legs, arms. Then the screaming began.

At first, Liteky did like the rest of the unwounded men and hugged the ground, praying not to get caught himself in the fusillade of fire. But then--moved by compassion or courage, or both--he jolted into action. Eyewitnesses on that day say Liteky rose from the ground and began moving through hostile fire toward the wounded. He crawled to them, knelt by their mangled bodies, presided over their agony. He administered last rites to the dying. "For some reason I didn't get hit," he says.

One wounded man became entangled in the dense, thorny underbrush. Liteky broke the vines and freed the man, ignoring the intense gunfire. He lugged the man away to a clearing nearby. Another man was too heavy and badly wounded to carry, so Liteky rolled onto his back, placed the man on his chest and carefully, as if in slow motion, crawled the man back to the clearing using elbows and heels to push himself along. He returned to the action again. At one point, said a witness, Liteky crawled to within 15 meters of enemy machine guns so as to "place himself between the enemy and the wounded men." For most of the day, Chaplain Liteky did not carry a weapon, though he wore fatigues and looked the part of a soldier. "I did stop and pick up a gun," he remembers, "but then I remember thinking--that would be a helluva way for a priest to die! So I put it down."

Later, when medevac helicopters arrived on the scene, Liteky reportedly stood up in the face of small arms and rocket fire and directed the helicopters into and out of the area. Captain Donald Drees, the company commander, told the military press that "Charlie Liteky inspired 50 men to hang on that day in the face of the most intense fire I have ever witnessed."

The siege at Bien Hoa went on for eight hours. Liteky, who had not been wounded during the first three hours of the fight, was eventually hit and sustained shrapnel wounds in the neck and foot. All told, Liteky saved 23 men that day.

For his actions, Liteky received the Congressional Medal of Honor. This medal is sacrosanct--less than 4,000 people have ever received it; only 150 of them are alive today. In November 1968, in the East Room of the White House, Lyndon Johnson placed the medal around Liteky's neck, saying, "Son, I'd rather have one of those babies than be president."

Today, Liteky is nonplussed about his actions on December 6, 1967. "I don't think we should even be awarded for compassionate action," he says. "It's just part of being a decent human being."



*Judy and Charlie Liteky, the ex-nun and ex-priest, were married in 1983 at their beloved St. John of God church in San Francisco's Sunset District.*

Being a decent human being, after all, is why Liteky became an army chaplain in the first place. It's also why he joined the priesthood. After a youth spent skipping school and rebelling against his career-military father, Liteky eventually straightened up and got an education. He decided to do the toughest, most honorable thing he thought a young man could do in life, and this meant joining the priesthood. In 1960, he joined up with the Missionary Servants Of The Most Holy Trinity, wore a collar and did God's work on the East Coast for six years. When the call went out for religious men to volunteer for duty in Vietnam, Liteky was glad for the opportunity to serve. At that time, he believed in the war; he believed the American government was right in wanting to fight communism there.

After training at a military base in Fort Benning, Georgia, Liteky went "in-country." He stayed for one tour, then extended it by six months. After the action at Bien Hoa, he returned home, then volunteered to go back again for yet another tour.

From his prison home now, Liteky seems ready to talk about the politics of Vietnam and the protest movement that arose to try and stop an unjust war. But he's uneasy talking about his day of heroism and the courage and the fear and the medal and what any of it might mean about his character.

"All I can say is ... death did not hold much fear for me that day. Even now, being in here ... it doesn't make sense for me to fear death."

**When Liteky arrived home from** his second tour in Vietnam, he had another battle on his hands--the celibacy aspect of his priestly vows. Among other things, he carried guilt about the fact that, while a priest, he'd lost his virginity to a prostitute in Saigon. "I struggled with it," he says of his promised celibacy. "It was the biggest internal struggle I've had in my life. To have vowed oneself to God, then say 'I can't do it!'" Liteky ended that struggle in 1975 by deciding to leave the priesthood. After spending the next six years in what he calls "the grand world of women" he met his soul mate and future wife, Judy Balch.

The two were fixed up on a blind date in 1980, shared dinner and conversation. The following Sunday, Liteky showed up without notice at Judy's church, St. John of God in San Francisco's Sunset District. "He didn't tell me he was coming," says Judy, who had been a nun for 13 years before leaving the order. "I remember being aware of him being there--and just the electricity of that. He knew this church was an important place for me so it was just amazing to me what he was saying by showing up there."

The pair began dating in earnest and immediately recognized that this was the Big One for them both. Tall and slender with short-cut auburn hair, Judy did not know about Liteky's medal and war heroism until several months into their relationship. Eventually, the former priest and former nun married at St. John of God on October 22, 1983.

**Where Liteky is spontaneous,** Judy is measured. Where the husband is eager, Judy is earnest. Liteky prides himself on thinking like a common man, while Judy can't help but come across as more of an analyst, an intellectual.

Liteky credits his wife with his transformation into a political activist; she's also the one who first got him focused on Central America. A longtime proponent of social justice, Judy urged her husband to start making the political and economic connections. Liteky began to listen to the stories of the refugees coming up from El Salvador. He started reading everything he could get his hands on regarding U.S. foreign policy in Central America.

Once in a while he would attend a protest rally with Judy but he'd usually respond with frustration. "I wasn't impressed," he says of the demonstrations he attended. "All these people shouting and marching around not doing anything. ... I just didn't think it was enough!"



Photo By Rick Reinhard  
In 1986, Liteky and other veterans conducted a 47-day fast on the steps of the Capitol to protest U.S. foreign policy in Central America. With Liteky are from left: Brian Willson, Duncan Murphy and George Mizo.

Soon Liteky traveled to Central America with a group of Vietnam veterans and heard more firsthand stories from people whose families had been disappeared or tortured in a manner that had the complicity of the U.S. government. "We all came to the same conclusion--that we were exploiting the people just like in Vietnam."

When Liteky returned home, something turned over in him. "The idealism that I had as a youth ... the pledge of allegiance and America the Beautiful and the Declaration of Independence--to have that idealism shattered and realize that we're no more than an empire trying to maintain ourselves--it made me sick to think of this kind of hypocrisy."

Wanting to make a dramatic statement about what he had learned, Liteky took center stage at a press conference held at the Vietnam Veteran's Wall in Washington, D.C., in July 1986. He renounced his medal, as well as the \$600 a month veteran's pension he was otherwise earmarked to receive for life. He left the decoration at the wall with a letter he wrote to then-President Ronald Reagan: "I find it ironic that conscience calls me to renounce the Congressional Medal of Honor for the same basic reason I received it--trying to save lives." It was an opening salvo from a man who was to become more and more willing to go to great lengths to bring attention to his cause.

News of what this former war hero had done resonated in the press across the country and caused a new awareness in Liteky and his wife. It was the first time they realized that his heroism during the war could focus substantial media and public attention on their cause.

In the fall of 1986, Liteky made another bold move. In the tradition of Gandhi, he and three other veterans--George Mizo, Brian Willson and Duncan Murphy--began a water-only, open-ended fast on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. It was to bring attention to how wrong they believed the U.S. government was in pursuing a foreign policy in Central America that undermined democracy and punished the poor. Liteky stated outright that he was willing to die for this cause.

Judy did not, at first, support her husband's spontaneous choice to begin the fast. In fact, when Liteky announced what he was about to undertake to his friends at St. John of God, nobody liked the news. Liteky's own brother Pat called him "nutso" for considering starving himself to the death. Another parishioner pointed out that Liteky was being selfish, that his act could mean tremendous suffering for his wife. Somebody else accused him of arrogance, saying, "Who do you think you are? Gandhi? Or do you think you're Jesus Christ?" Liteky responded no, he was just trying to be the best man he could be.

But there was no changing his mind. Eventually, Judy decided she had no option but to honor her husband's choice to fast, so three weeks after Liteky stopped eating, she joined him in D.C. The pair spent their afternoons on the expansive steps of the Capitol, facing the Supreme Court and Library of Congress. They spent hour after hour talking with the veterans and others passing by about the cause. "It was a most remarkable time," Judy says.

The fast grew long. On their 47th day without food, Liteky and Mizo, the two who had begun the fasting earliest, were near starved to death. Letters poured in by the thousands begging the men to take food. The New York Times and Washington Post covered the story; Dan Rather talked about the veterans on the evening news; Phil Donahue promised them a forum on his talk show. Supporters tried convincing the men that the media attention meant the fast had worked. They urged them to take food and live on to fight another day. Also, Judy was aware that if the men took the fast to its ultimate conclusion, he would not be the first to die. "Charlie knew George would go first," she says, and he knew he had the power to stop this.

Ultimately, the men decided to end the fast. On the evening of October 17, 1986, a group of 500 supporters gathered to break bread at midnight with Liteky and the other veterans at a Mass and celebration on the steps. Judy gets tears in her eyes now recalling that evening's events. "People were moved to want to be with these men," she said.

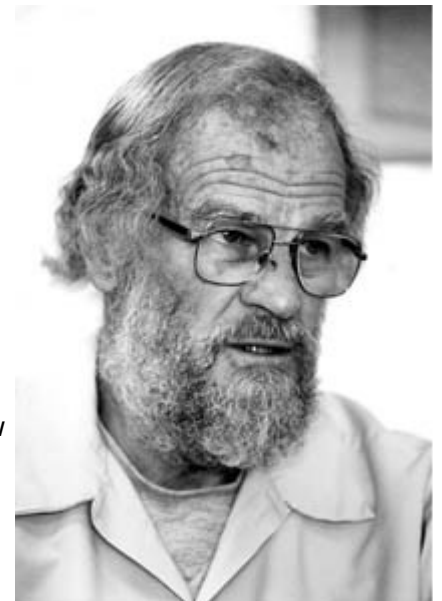


Photo By Nell Campbell  
*"I am trying to help create a nonviolent world," writes Liteky in his prison diary, "and to do so a person must face violence ... and death if necessary."*

The fast was over, but the protests were not.

In the fall of 1988, Liteky journeyed to the Guatemalan Embassy with a handful of others and, like a scene from a movie, chained himself for more than a week to its front gates, protesting the U.S.'s support of a Guatemalan military government that was well-known for human rights violations against the country's poor and peasant class. That action was dramatic, but "it didn't get much story," says Judy. "No press took that anywhere."

On Independence Day 1990, Liteky came up with yet another idea for getting attention for the cause of changing U.S. foreign policy in Central America. Flag burning was a hot-button issue at the time, so Liteky made a huge American flag banner, scrawled peace messages between the stars and stripes, and took it to the Capitol steps on the Fourth of July. At an event staged for the press, he read his "citizen's declaration of independence," hung his flag upside down and proceeded to burn it. He fully expected to be locked up for desecrating the flag that day, but nobody arrested him, nobody seemed to care.

"You can't say all his actions work out as dramatically as he might have imagined," Judy says with a smile. "I've watched him do these protest actions for 20 years. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

**It was later in 1990 when the Reverend Roy Bourgeois**, a Maryknoll priest, invited Liteky to focus his protests on a Defense Department-funded institution called the School of the Americas (SOA). Based in Fort Benning, Georgia--ironically the same town where Liteky had undergone his Army training and across the river from where he'd attended seminary--the SOA was a school designed by the Pentagon to help foreign soldiers and officers fight communism in Latin American countries.

Peace activists documented how, during its 54-year history, the SOA had readied over 60,000 Latin American troops in commando tactics, military intelligence, psychological operations (such as torture), and advanced combat skills (such as assassination). Among others, the SOA was the alma mater of notorious Panamanian military "strongman" General Manuel Noriega and the late Roberto d'Aubuisson, the man credited with planning the 1980 assassination of El Salvador's much-loved Archbishop Oscar Romero.

During the early years, the campaign to shut down the SOA was so small as to be minuscule. After staging a few protests that didn't get much attention, core members of the group--Liteky, his brother Pat and Bourgeois--trespassed in 1990 onto the grounds of the school, illegally entering the SOA museum's "hall of fame." The protestors proceeded to squirt red paint (signifying blood) from baby bottles up onto the portraits on the walls. Liteky was arrested for destroying government property and was given a "permanent ban"--forbidden by the U.S. government to ever return to the base. In 1991, Liteky did his first real jail time for this act of trespass--six months in a federal penitentiary in Allenwood, Pennsylvania.

But the prison experience did not stop him. Far from it. Going to prison actually became a way for Liteky and others to draw attention to the cause. So, despite the ban, Liteky was to return to the SOA again and again over the next years. Sometimes he'd be arrested. Sometimes he'd be held and released without arrest. One time, Liteky thought he was sure he'd be arrested at the SOA for climbing a tree and unfurling a banner, but instead the police arrested the people who had gathered below the tree to support him.

In the late 1990s, and as a result of the early actions by Liteky, Bourgeois and others, the SOA Watch movement began growing in earnest. The activists started holding an annual protest march around the Thanksgiving holiday in memory of six Jesuit priests who were murdered at that time of year in El Salvador by men who were trained at the SOA. By 1997, the annual protest drew 2,000 demonstrators. Last year, the number surged to 12,000, with celebrities like *The West Wing's* Martin Sheen getting arrested. The effort to close down the SOA had become the center of a significant nonviolent protest movement in America.

It took Liteky several months in his garage to construct the symbolic coffins that he and others carried in the November 1999 demonstration to signify the death of innocent civilians in Latin America. Liteky led thousands of protestors to "cross the line"--many carrying the coffins--and enter the SOA



Photo By Nell Campbell  
A guard peers in through a security window as Liteky is interviewed at Lompoc's minimum security camp.

grounds on that November day. He was arrested then and again in December doing this. He was given the maximum sentence: two misdemeanor counts of trespassing; two six-month terms to be served consecutively in Lompoc Federal Prison, starting last July.

Has Liteky and the SOA Watch movement made a difference? Yes and no. As the ranks of the protestors grow, so too do the number of representatives in Congress who support efforts to stop the Pentagon's \$20 million a year funding of the school. In 1999, the House of Representatives voted 230 to 197 (including an "aye" vote from Sacramento's Representative Robert Matsui) to cut \$2 million off the SOA budget. But a joint Senate/House conference committee later overturned that vote.

And last December, while Liteky sat in jail, the SOA was officially "closed," then re-opened under a new name as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. No one doubts that this happened as a result of the protests. School authorities say the new name symbolizes a new "human rights" emphasis at the institution, but Liteky and others claim the name change is cosmetic at best, and that students of the school are still being taught the same old tactics. Indeed, a February 2000 Human Rights Watch Report in Colombia implicates seven recent SOA graduates in 1999 crimes including kidnapping, murder, massacres and the setting up of paramilitary groups.

Ultimately, though, the sacrifices made by Liteky and others have not yet had their desired effect. The school remains open.

**It should come as no surprise** that Charlie Liteky's intensity and dogged sensibilities have taken a toll on his marriage. In fact, he and Judy have spent long stretches of time apart over the past decade. A math teacher, Judy earned most of the couple's income while her husband worked as an activist or served jail time. At one point, the pair moved to Washington, D.C., to spend more time together and be "closer to the action," but Judy says her husband found himself constantly drawn back to Fort Benning.

"The actions were always pulling us apart," she says. Judy found herself alone much of the time and in a part of the world she wasn't familiar with. She missed her friends and her church. Ultimately, she made the decision to return to San Francisco regardless of whether her husband would follow.

Judy lives now in a small pink home in that neighborly section of San Francisco that borders the city college. The place is cozy with comfortable couches, a bountiful garden and brightly colored art everywhere. Two cats--Jojo and Ceci--roam the place. The man of the house resides here in spirit only.

When the judge handed Liteky the one-year sentence, it was a time of reckoning for the marriage. In the late spring of 2000, Liteky returned home to the pink house for the months before he was to report to prison and settled into the simple joys of living with Judy. The couple spent quality time with each other, connected with old friends, visited old haunts. On the verge of being separated for a full year, the Liteky's rekindled their union.

Since July 2000, Judy has made the day-long trek to visit her husband at Lompoc one weekend per month. To say Charlie Liteky looks forward to these visits is an understatement. The prisoner doesn't hesitate to tell a reporter that he'll probably "get restless" once out of prison and go back to fighting for the cause. But ask him his immediate plan of action upon release and he says: "I think first God will give me a little time with Judy. ... We are very different and we approach things very differently. But when our two approaches are brought together into a unified view of life--then it's balanced, it's beautiful."

Indeed, talk to anyone in the Sacramento SOA Watch movement and they're bound to wax eloquent about the Litekys and what is perceived as their model union. "They're a wonderful couple," says Wiedner. "They're extremely dedicated." And Janice Freeman, who was arrested and banned from the SOA last fall along with other Sacramento activists, describes the Litekys as the ideal couple. "They spend a great deal of time apart, but they work for this common cause," she says. "I find them both remarkable. Their lives are a statement."

If that is so, perhaps the statement would be this: Liteky's wartime heroism cannot be questioned. And his devotion to protesting injustice, especially surrounding U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, is equally clear. But his stubborn penchant to take things further than most makes it difficult to determine if this man is a

hero or a fanatic, lunatic or a sage. And what of a married couple whose passionate concern for the poor--however shared--often finds them apart, adrift, alone.

"I see Christ as a very loving person who basically preached love," says Liteky, when asked to describe his life philosophy. "And it seems to me that if one grows in that, then the oppression of poor people becomes heightened. You see it more clearly and feel it more deeply. And your reaction to it comes out of love ... and in perfect love, there is no fear."

Perfect love and no fear. Perhaps Charlie Liteky longs now for that exact combination--for the clarity of compassion and lack of fear he felt that day in the Bien Hoa Province, where he won a medal that was retrieved after he renounced it and today sits in the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

Liteky himself would like to be a part of history, to die a martyr's death for the cause of justice. He has referred many times--in person, in his diaries and in court--to the nobility of dying in prison. At his pre-trial hearing before the Lompoc sentencing, Liteky even told the judge that he would like to die in jail. He quoted Thoreau, saying prison is "an appropriate place for a protestor to die."

It is a kind of death reserved for the brave, for the faithful, for those few who manage, with their lives, to line up what is in their nature with what is in their hearts and minds. It is a death reserved for patriots, saints and holy men. Flawed and extraordinary, perhaps Charlie Liteky is one of these.

© Copyright 2001 Chico Community Publishing, Inc.

[See: [Fair Use](#)]