

River Trip Buoys Awareness of Treatment Courts

A Vietnam War veteran traveled the Mississippi River to spread the word about a nationwide program that helps veterans in the criminal justice system

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Vietnam War veteran Howard Jenkins spent six months renovating a pontoon boat — adding a bunk bed, shower and sink — in preparation for the second leg of an expedition down the Mississippi River.

His goal: to raise awareness of veteran treatment courts.

“I could go out on the street and ask 100 people, and 99 people wouldn’t know [about treatment courts],” said Jenkins, who served in Vietnam in 1970-71 with the 1st Bn., 92nd FA, as a field artillery fire control Marine.

Veteran treatment courts began in 2008 in Buffalo, N.Y., and are modeled after drug and mental health treatment courts, according to the National Center for State Courts. They give veterans who committed a non-violent crime a chance at rehabilitation instead of jail time. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of treatment courts and “veterans dockets” increased from 168 to 461, according to a VA report.

‘Attention’ for Veterans

Jenkins departed Knoxville, Tenn., for Minnesota’s Lake Itasca on July 13, with traveling companion Eric Hilemon. The first leg of the trip down the Mississippi was completed in a canoe because of the shallow river terrain, according to Jenkins. He switched to his pontoon boat in St. Paul, Minn. Jenkins traveled to New Orleans, then returned to Knoxville.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

“This is going to be special in this respect,” Jenkins said. “The whole purpose of this is to get attention. If people don’t see me, I’m wasting my time.”

Jenkins’ mission is something that he believes in “very deeply,” according to Frank Vollmer, a fellow Vietnam War veteran and mentor coordinator at the Knox County (Tenn.) Veteran Treatment Court.

Vollmer learned in December of Jenkins’ plan to travel the Mississippi to raise awareness for veteran treatment courts.

“That’s Howard,” said Vollmer, a member of VFW Post 3380 in Dandridge, Tenn. “If Howard finds something that he believes in and wants to do, if he can get help that’s good, but if he’s got to do it on his own, he’s not afraid to take on gestures or efforts like these to promote the various programs for veterans.”

If “veteran treatment court” becomes a household term, Jenkins said he will have accomplished what he set out to do — help his fellow veterans, some of whom also might have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

About two years after returning from Vietnam, Jenkins said, he started experiencing PTSD symptoms. He did not receive an official diagnosis from the VA until 2005.

“Sometimes it takes three or four years before it bothers people,” Jenkins said, “and I basically suffered with it for 35 years, until I went to the VA.”

Jenkins said that in his role with fire direction control (FDC) in Vietnam, he heard stories that the FDC was the first location the Viet Cong wanted to “take out” because that area controls the radios.

“I’d always worry about what I would do if they came to the FDC and threw a satchel charge into there,” Jenkins said.

One day after an attack, he said, a satchel charge was located in an unexploded ordnance area, and VC were heading toward the FDC until a soldier shot him.

“Nobody knows why things like that happen, but that just blew my mind,” Jenkins said. “That’s what I think caused it. It was first thinking about that and then the reality of the possibility [of being attacked].”

Tennessee's Treatment Courts

Vollmer said that Knoxville’s veteran treatment court was established in December 2016. Vollmer and Jenkins both became certified peer recovery specialists through the state of Tennessee and volunteer at the court. The Vietnam vets met through a program for veterans

who have PTSD and continued working together at the treatment court.

“We’re trying to also get courts established in Sevier County [Tenn.], and not all counties have courts with enough [of a] veteran population to have a court in each county,” said Vollmer, who served in Vietnam from 1967-68 with the Air Force’s 6924th Security Sqdn. in DaNang as an intelligence analyst.

However, Vollmer said that Knoxville judge Chuck Cerny agreed to take veterans from counties where such a court does not exist. The first veteran to graduate from the Knoxville program was from Memphis, according to Vollmer.

“After a year’s probation and graduation, his record for the charges that had been placed against him were reduced to a misdemeanor rather than a felony,” Vollmer said. “And he’s had no relapses since then. We still check with each other now and then.”

Veteran treatment courts, according to Vollmer, are a “great” opportunity for veterans to have second, and sometimes third, chances. He said Jenkins’ trip is a “good effort” to publicize the courts and make civilians aware of the program.

“I think there’s fewer individuals going into the military now, and we want to keep this program out in front of the public,” Vollmer said.

This article is featured in the February 2020 issue of the [VFW magazine](#).