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Franciscan Fr. Ed McKenzie leads a ritual during the Veterans Retreat at Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside, California. In the background is Franciscan Fr. Roger Lopez. (Jen Jauregui)



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November 11, 2025

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When U.S. Air Force Sgt. Ed McKenzie got off the Freedom Bird from Vietnam at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in 1970, he came face to face with several young men wearing remnants of the same uniform he had worn in-country. Only these men were holding up protest signs. McKenzie realized that "the world" he'd yearned to come home to after the war was not the one he had left behind one year earlier.

"I was part of the support team and worked in the business of 'saving' people, not killing them. That fact, more than likely, was a piece of my salvation and reconciliation. I never had to sight another human being along the barrel of a rifle, thanks be to God. But many of my friends sure did," the veteran of the 38th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron told the National Catholic Reporter.

He remembered "the almost constant and daily shelling and mortaring of our bases and the sapper attacks at night on our perimeters."

"It all took its toll," he said. "The constant state of vigilance and living in fear with a readiness to react to whatever might harm us, cleaning the helicopters upon their return of the human remains that the battle and its aftermath produced was, and is, something I will never forget. I am haunted by that sacred blood spilled even today. Blood consecrated on the deck/altar of my helicopter."

Once McKenzie was home, Veterans Affairs and the veterans' organizations were not of much help.

"I decided to join the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. I applied to a local post and was denied entrance because I was told I had not been in a war. Only a 'police action'! Sure felt like war to me!" he said.

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Today, as a Franciscan priest at the Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside, California, McKenzie still struggles with the post-traumatic stress disorder caused by his service in Vietnam. And yet, one of the ways he deals with it, as the leader of the Veterans Retreat at the Mission, is to help other veterans of all wars and of any faith come to

terms with what they experienced fighting America's battles.

As McKenzie conducts San Luis Rey's free one-day retreats for veterans and their families, he is ever mindful of the 38th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron's motto: "That others may live." The unit was tasked with rappelling down from helicopters in the middle of firefights to rescue wounded soldiers and retrieve the deceased, often at their own peril. McKenzie himself was a hoist operator on one of these helicopters.

He is also mindful that St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of his order, was a soldier, too.

"Francis was a combat veteran who lived his life battling the effects of PTSD. He was a knight and POW [prisoner of war] for a year, held in filth and squalor in a hole in the ground. He was a cavalryman on horse with armor, sword, mace and shield. His army was absolutely slaughtered on the battlefield in hand-to-hand combat," said McKenzie, who joined the Franciscans in 2003 and was ordained in 2011.

"Soldiers need to unlearn many warrior survival skills that kept them alive in the war zone," McKenzie said. "We need to help make that happen for them. They're physically and mentally depleted and exhausted. They have to deal with lots of stuff."



The labyrinth at Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside, California (Jen Jauregui)

Meditation and small group breakouts are two of the several ways that the veteran retreats make that happen, according to McKenzie.

Ben and Jen Jauregui of La Habra, California, have attended one of the veterans' retreats. Ben served with the Marines as a CH-46 helicopter mechanic at several duty stations, including Desert Storm in Southwest Asia, Restore Hope in Somalia, and Operation Desert Shield, where he was wounded. Jen is a private pilot and retired flight instructor.

"I liked the idea of veteran-focused fellowship at a mission I already enjoyed so much," Ben told NCR.

"I just had a gut feeling that this retreat was something Ben could benefit from, but I was also intrigued that veterans' family members were also encouraged to attend,"

Jen said.

Ben had the chance to share some of his experiences in combat with those in attendance at the retreat.

"It helped me to work through some hard emotions I've stored up all these years. I went from struggling because I've never really had a chance to connect with someone that 'gets it' at the beginning, to more relieved by the end. The grounding activity especially lifted me physically, mentally and spiritually," he said.

"Listening to other vets and their stories made me realize many of us are in the same boat of anger caused by how us older vets didn't really have any mental health awareness or care when we were released and how we were left to struggle alone until fairly recently. It was eye-opening and really helped me recognize that I am not alone and that it is OK to do things like this to help myself," Ben added.



A quiet area at the retreat center of Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside, California
(Jen Jauregui)

In the beginning, Jen had some concerns.

"It was a little intimidating at first. Not because I was going to feel unwelcome or out of place, but because I worried for Ben. I wasn't sure if an activity like this would be triggering or calming for him. Once I realized the staff was experienced, skilled, and more than willing and able to make this a successful experience for him, I felt encouraged and it left me freer to focus on my role at the retreat," she said.

Her role at the retreat was key, just as it is in their daily lives.

"Ben is a service-connected disabled vet," she said, "and as his full-time caregiver, I appreciated that the organizers of the retreat took the time to match me up with those experiencing similar circumstances for small group activities."

For Ben and Jen, the grounds played a very important role in the success of the retreat.

"The intense sense of privacy and being blocked off from public view is what makes this location so perfect for a retreat like this. The open, green spaces with gentle sea breezes really allow a person to unplug and focus not only on what's happening inside the retreat center but also themselves," Jen said.

People attending the retreat are free to roam and enjoy the chapel, gardens, courtyard, labyrinth, Stations of the Cross walk, and refreshment center.

"When you're inside the retreat center and on free time, it's very much a you-do-you vibe. Some people journal, some people chat with one another, others walk, meditate, pray, whatever," Jen said. "The ability to do whatever we felt compelled to do away from the mission's general visitors definitely enhanced our ability to decompress and process the intense emotions of the day."

McKenzie said he and the retreat are doing God's work so "that others may live," and that, indeed, "soldiers can become saints."