

Proud to Be:
Writing by American Warriors
Volume 2



Edited by Susan Swartwout

The cover for the second *Proud to Be* features *Reluctant Hero* by Brooklyn artist Jonas Angelet. He created the image after interviewing Vietnam veteran Michael Gourlie, U.S. Army, as part of the Veteran Print Project, which connects artists and veterans in workshops to make prints based on oral histories.

Missouri Books Unlock the Personal Stories of American Warriors

by Barbara MacRobie

Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not have even a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Years' War.
Who else won it?

— Bertolt Brecht, from *Questions From a Worker Who Reads*

Geoff Giglierano, executive director of the Missouri Humanities Council, is on board with these questions. “We’d have a whole different view of Caesar’s Gallic Wars if we had some poetry from a couple of centurions,” he says. In modern terms, that’s exactly what the Council and two other Missouri organizations are bringing to the world in a pioneering series of books, *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors*.

The books are giving the people at the heart of the action—veterans, military service personnel, and their families—a way to tell their personal stories.

“These are the people who made the history, not just generals and presidents,” Geoff said. “They want to

express themselves. They need to be heard. And what they have to say is very important for the rest of us.”

Created by the Missouri Humanities Council, Warriors Arts Alliance, and Southeast Missouri State University Press, *Proud to Be* debuted with its first volume last year. The second volume is set to launch this November 15. In the latter part of this article, we’ve included several excerpts from the new book.

Stunning response to first book led to series

When the University Press released the first *Proud to Be* in November 2012, “we thought it would be the one and only,” said Dr. Susan Swartwout, the Southeast Missouri State University professor of English who is the publisher of the University Press and the editor of both *Proud to Be* books. “But the response was so huge. And it didn’t stop.”

The second volume, said Susan, “is even bigger than the first one.” For the first book, a total of 161 poems, stories, and essays arrived in answer to the University Press’ nationwide call for submissions, and 74 were published in the book’s 255 pages. Eight of the authors were from Missouri. For the second, 229 works were submitted and 87 were published in 320 pages. Sixteen of the authors were from Missouri. Plus, in the second

Volume 2 Launch Events November 15

Proud to Be: Writings by American Warriors, Volume 2 will be launched on Friday, November 15 via two free events in St. Louis. Both will feature readings by contributing authors, book sales, signings, and discussions. The first takes place from 10 a.m. to noon at the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri. The second is from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Central Library, the flagship of the St. Louis Public Library. For full details, see [the Missouri Humanities Council website](#).

volume, the focus expanded. The book adds photography and includes not only essays by veterans but interviews with veterans.

“We extended it to interviews,” said Deborah Marshall, founder and director of the Warriors Arts Alliance, “for veterans who perhaps cannot write their own stories. Also, one of the best ways of interacting with other people is to ask them about their lives.”

“After we published the first book,” said Susan, “we started getting emails and notes from people saying, ‘My husband—my son—my dad—never told me his stories. When he read your book, he started talking about them.’ That was another impetus for us to go on.”

“We know that art heals,” said Deb. “Not by itself, but it is part of a healing regiment for people whether they are physically wounded or not. I’ve been asked a thousand times by veterans, ‘Please help me tell my story.’ They cannot just go back to their old lives. So often their families don’t understand that. We know from what veterans have told us that we are helping to give them hope.”

A fateful trout fishing trip

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the power of the arts to help heal the wounds of war. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts partnered with the Department of Defense to create the *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* project to help troops and their families write about their experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, and stateside. In 2013, Operation Homecoming has taken place as part of a medical program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

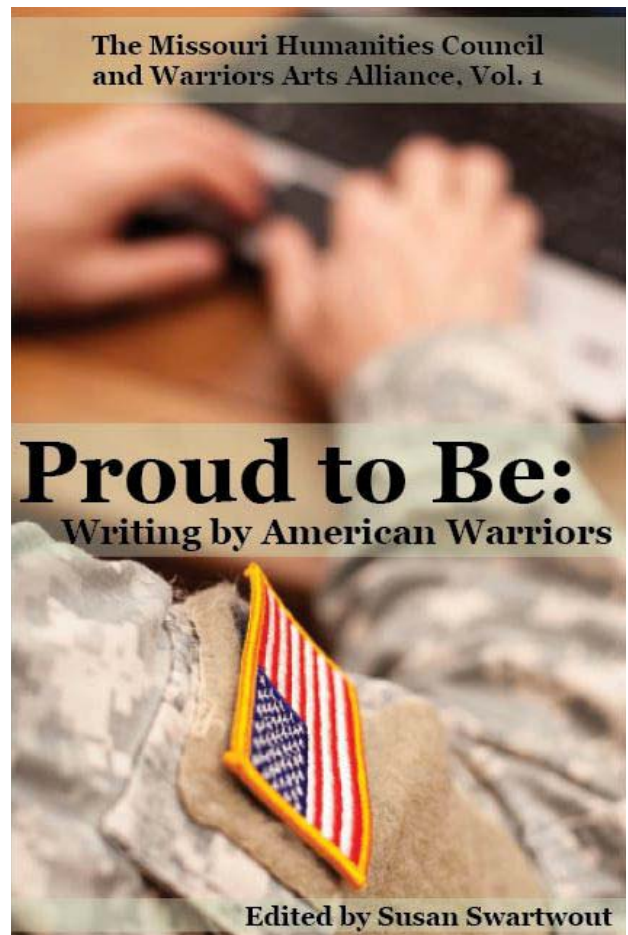
In Missouri, the formal beginnings of what would become *Proud to Be* were the writing workshops for veterans established in 2011 at Jefferson Barracks, the historic military post and Veterans Administration medical facility in St. Louis, by the Missouri Humanities Council and the Missouri Writers’ Guild. But the story goes back to the previous summer, when Deborah Marshall, then vice-president of the Guild, took a fishing trip on Missouri’s North Fork River.

“When I was staying at the River of Life Farm trout fishing resort in Ozark County,” she said, “Myron McKee, the proprietor, told me one of his pet projects was getting the wounded warriors from Fort Leonard Wood to take the run of the place for a few days just to enjoy themselves. I asked him to let me know the next time he brought in a group. I was working part-time at Cabela’s then, and my store manager sent me and one of the outfitters, Bruce Morton, down with a bunch of fly rods to teach the veterans how to fly fish.

“You know how it is when you’re out there fishing. Everyone is telling you about their adventures, and you get to talk forever. I was so impressed by these young men and women. I promised them if there was anything I could figure out to do to assure that what had happened to troops coming back from Vietnam would not happen to them, I would do it. Those few days changed my life.”

Enter the Humanities Council and the University Press

The next step came when Deb needed funding for the Missouri Writers’ Guild’s annual conference and approached the Missouri Humanities Council’s new executive director, Geoff Giglierano. “Geoff said,



‘It sounds like you have a really nice conference planned, but we’re beginning to focus more on those voices we don’t get to hear from very much.’ I told him about River of Life Farm. ‘Wouldn’t it be cool,’ I said, ‘if we could come up with a project where the writers could help the veterans tell their stories.’ He sat straight up in his chair and said, ‘This is a project I’ve been waiting for!’”

One thing led to another. The Missouri Humanities Council and the Missouri Writers’ Guild worked with Rita Reichert, the occupational therapist at Jefferson Barracks, to start the writing workshops. Deb founded a spinoff from the Writers’ Guild, a confederation of organizations and individuals that she named the Warriors Arts Alliance, to concentrate on helping veterans, their families, and the community understand through both literary and visual arts what was going on in the veterans’ lives. Bowled over by the quality of the writing coming out of Jefferson Barracks, she and Geoff reached out to Susan Swartwout, whom Deb already knew through the Missouri Writers’ Guild. The idea for *Proud to Be* was born.

“It was a perfect storm,” Susan said. “I said I’d edit the book and produce it, and all the fun stuff!”

The Missouri Humanities Council put up the funds for a writing competition to accompany the book, with winners in the categories of poetry, fiction, and essays.

“The whole project was a collective effort and decision,” Geoff said. “It was a lot like, ‘Hey kids, let’s put on a play—my uncle has a barn, and my aunt will let us use her sheets for curtains!’ We thought, ‘The Warrior Arts Alliance has all these military contacts, SEMO will help with the judging and the logistics, the Missouri Humanities Council will provide the prizes, and everybody will help promote it. It’s a collaboration, and it’s always evolving.’”

Beyond the first two books

Not only are the three organizations continuing to partner on what is now an ongoing series of *Proud to Be* books, but they are growing their activities for veterans, current military personnel, and their families.

Warriors Arts Alliance

- The Alliance is continuing the Jefferson Barracks workshops and hopes to reach other military sites.



Art from the *Creative Conversations* workshops, on paper made from uniforms

- In St. Louis over the first weekend of April 2013, the Alliance partnered with VSA Missouri, the independent statewide organization committed to equal access to the arts for people with disabilities, to create a four-day exploration of *Creative Conversations: Uniting Veterans and Community through the Arts*. Part One was bringing the national Combat Paper Project and the national Veteran Print Project to town for joint workshops. Combat Paper teaches military veterans how to make handmade paper and art out of their old uniforms. The uniforms are literally beaten to a pulp. “Artists from the Print Project and the local community talked with veterans as they were dismantling their

uniforms,” said Deb. “Then, the veterans’ stories were eventually printed onto Combat Paper. The process is cathartic and illuminating for the veterans and artists alike. Our cover art for *Proud to Be 2* is by Jonas Angelet, a Veteran Print Project artist.” Both the Combat Paper Project and the Veteran Print Project were founded and are run by veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Part Two was bringing in StoryCorps, the

national oral history project established in 2003 to record and share the stories of ordinary Americans. StoryCorps Military Initiatives recorded conversations with veterans at the Regional Arts Commission and the University of Missouri-St. Louis' new Veterans Center. Interviews are recorded on CDs, aired on National Public Radio, and archived in the Library of Congress.

- The Alliance is bringing Combat Paper back to St. Louis in collaboration with the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri from November 11 through January 6 in the special exhibition, *War and Healing: Artwork from the Combat Paper Project*. Details are up on [the Mercantile Library's website](#).

Missouri Humanities Council

- On November 16, the day after the launch of *Proud to Be 2*, the Council will host a symposium for writers at the Missouri History Museum. "It's not a public program, but a lot of the writers will be in town for the launch, and they'll have a chance to talk to each other, to professional historians, and some publishing folks," Geoff said. "Veterans of different generations will be able to interact. The museum, bless their heart, is providing the space for us at no cost." Help like this is especially important for the Council because although it was created in 1971 by federal legislation as an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and receives some funding from the state of Missouri, it is not a state agency but an independent 501(c)(3) (unlike the Missouri Arts Council, which is a division of the state Department of Economic Development).
- On September 27-28, the Council helped support the Springfield-Greene County Library District's Wordfest, where wordsmiths of all kinds performed throughout Springfield's downtown, including a reading of five of the veterans published in the first volume of *Proud to Be*.



Snipe, by Gerardo "Tony" Mena, published in *Proud To Be 2*

- "We're trying to have more symposia and more readings by veterans of their works around the state," said Geoff. "We also hope we can get involved with the Museum of Missouri Military History in Jefferson City as they expand. I think that's going to be a focal point for veterans telling their stories."

Southeast Missouri State University Press

- The University Press will publish a *Proud to Be* volume every year, "as long as there is interest," said Susan. June 1, 2014 is the deadline for submissions for the third volume. Details are on [the University Press website](#).
- The Press is embarking on publishing a Military-Service Literature Series, one book a year, alternating poetry and fiction. "We are emphasizing military service over military history—the voices of the people, not historical analysis," Susan said. Deb noted that she coined "military service literature" as a genre name "because 'military writing' implies technical terms, and it's also very important that we include spouses, children, and parents. Susan liked it, so we went with it!" In February 2014, the kickoff book for the annual series will be *The Shape of Our Faces No Longer Matters*, the first full-length book of poetry by Gerardo "Tony" Mena, a decorated Iraqi Freedom veteran who now teaches high school in Columbia.

Warrior pride, human spirit

When the team worked on creating a title for the first volume, “proud to be” emerged from veterans’ comments about the pride they felt in serving their country. The term “warrior” was a natural.

“It has become commonly used, and it says so much more than something like ‘grunt.’ It is much more duty-driven,” said Susan. Also, said Deb, “We didn’t want to do ‘heroes.’ A lot of soldiers do not feel they were heroes. They feel they were doing their jobs, and they’re embarrassed by that baggage-laden term,” she said.

“‘Warriors’ signifies that ‘we are the people who have been through hell and we’re still standing.’ And the word emphasizes how the stories resonate with everyone, military or not. If you live long enough, you’re going to be a warrior somewhere along the line.”

Geoff notes that the two volumes received many submissions from Vietnam veterans. “They’re really getting into this,” he said. “They seem to feel they are ready now, and have acceptance for telling their stories and sharing their points of view, whereas many were not comfortable before.”

The intense emotional impact of the stories made editing the books a challenge but extraordinarily rewarding, said Susan. “I think everyone will have a similar reaction,” she said.

“There are stories of bravery and of horrible loss. The warriors’ loyalty and devotion to their combat buddies are always, always there. Some stories are very sad. Some are humorous. Some are stunning in their objectivity of horror. And always there’s the human spirit that overrides everything.”

How to Buy *Proud to Be: Writings by American Warriors, Volumes 1 and 2*

Volume 2

- [Southeast Missouri State University Press](#) – If you buy a copy directly from the University Press or at one of the November 15 launch events, it will include a limited-edition bookmark made from paper from the April 2013 Combat Paper Project workshops in St. Louis. Susan herself crafted about 1,000 bookmarks by reinforcing them with an explanatory sticker that begins, “Your bookmark was part of a military uniform.” “When you see a squiggly line in your bookmark,” she said, “that’s a thread.”

- [Amazon](#)
- [Barnes & Noble](#)

Volume 1

- [Southeast Missouri State University Press](#)
- [Amazon](#)
- [Barnes & Noble](#)

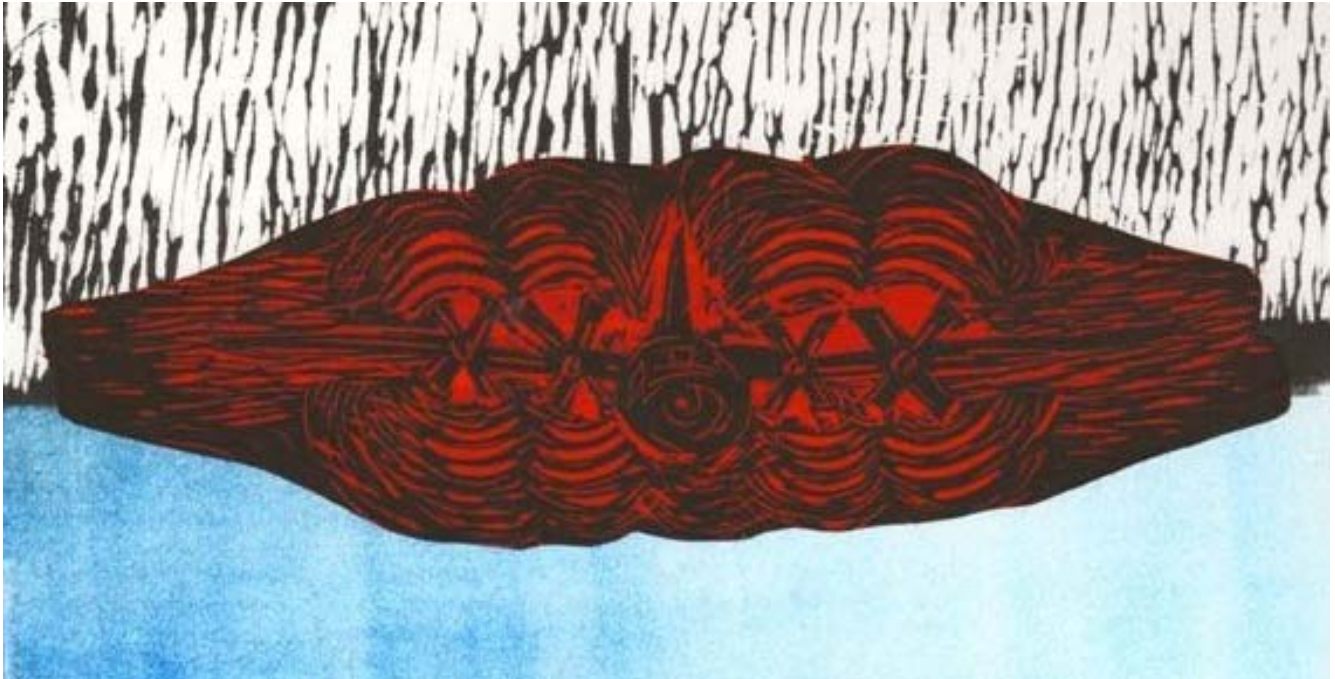


More about organizations in this story

- Combat Paper Project, combatpaper.org
- Missouri Humanities Council, mohumanities.org
- NEA’s *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, arts.gov/national/homecoming
- Southeast Missouri State University Press, www6.semo.edu/universitypress
- StoryCorps Military Voices Initiative, storycorps.org/military-voices
- Veteran Print Project, veteranprintproject.com
- VSA Missouri, vsamissouri.org
- Warriors’ Arts Alliance, [Facebook Page](#) (their new website is under construction)

Selections from *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors, Volume 2*

"If we as a country truly do owe so much to these few, then perhaps our best way of paying them back is to read, listen, and learn," says John McManus, military historian at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, in his introduction to *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors, Volume 2*. Here is just a smidgen of the riches in the book.



Art from the *Creative Conversations* workshops, on paper made from uniforms
(note: this art does not appear in *Proud to Be 2*)

***My Metal Mama* (excerpts)**

– Jay Harden, O'Fallon, Missouri

Jay Harden flew 63 combat missions as a B-52 navigator in Vietnam. He also served in the Missouri Air National Guard and became a Department of Defense scientist. In his 2009 book of poetry, My War in Pieces: Frags From the Edge of Vietnam, he says he began to write "cogently" in 1997. His homage to the plane that got him through the war was the Essay Winner of the Proud to Be 2 writing competition. He is also present in the anthology by Pluck Under Fire: Interview With a Land Girl, for which he won the Interview category, and his poem Raging River.

I want you to meet my "buf" lady, my metal mama, my eight-lung screaming savior, a kerosene-sucking mother monster of 400,000 pounds who lifted life, deposited death, violated gravity, kept me alive, and brought my young ass home from Vietnam to my real woman, a sweet Southern girl with a heart as open as that ocean between us.... To the rest of the world she was known as the Stratofortress, a pretentious five-dollar polysyllable if you ask me; in my flight log I simply called her Six Six Eight Nine, my designated representative for this truth telling. She was the D model of the B-52, one of the Tall Tails.

After more than a year of intensive training, Jay met his plane for the first time.

I walked out to the aircraft with my instructor for my first flight, and I was overwhelmed. No one told me about the sensory overload. The din of dozens of engines starting up, and ships taxiing and launching, made ordinary conversation obsolete, ears scream for mercy, and hand signals invaluable. The smell of every conceivable petroleum product would drive any environmentalist to a monastery. Everywhere people were busy: the crew chiefs, the armourers, the fuelers, the grease monkeys, each single-minded, all dancing in a focused ballet of fatigues. My ego scurried into the nearest dark lobe of my brain, taking my confidence hostage. I felt doomed. And I hadn't even climbed aboard.

The first training flight was excruciating. Jay threw up seven times. That night he wept and told his wife he could never fly again. But soon, "my metal mama and me became one tight and mighty muscle."

She, her sisters, and I were mutual shepherds of each other during sixty plus bombing missions over Southeast Asia. She never failed me. I commanded; she obeyed, with predictable, awkward grace. She protected me and furnished me with the very breath of life at 40,000 feet. She showed me the throat-catching majesty of the cosmos at the night edge of heaven.

In 1998, nearly 30 years after he came home from Vietnam, Jay spotted his beloved plane on the cover of Air Force magazine and learned she had not been hacked up like most of her sisters but "given a worthy eternal mission" at the American Air Museum in Duxford, England.

There she sat, fully restored and protected, as she had protected me, elegant and more worthy of my affection than ever.... I managed to keep my flying jacket from our last flight, and I wore it again that day in Duxford when I placed my palm against her pristine paint, never so gleaming, and leaned into her with head down to hide my face. Feelings strong and unexpected threw me back in time. And again I felt our inexplicable, profound bond, burnished by the misunderstood war we shared. For a moment or two, I was young and bulletproof again and wanted desperately to strap in and fly her just one more time. One more time for the good guys. One more mission to try and promote freedom and save lives by discouraging, possibly taking, others. No one can understand that meditation between she and me.



Dear Kindred Spirit

– Sheree Nielsen, Wentzville, Missouri

Sheree Nielsen's photo of her husband, Russell, who served in the Air Force for eight years, shows him writing his thoughts for the Kindred Spirit mailbox on Bird Island, North Carolina. "The legend of the Kindred Spirit is that an anonymous person close to 40 years ago, placed the mailbox and bench for passersby on Bird Island to leave their thoughts and prayers," Sheree wrote when she submitted her work to the Proud to Be 2 photograph competition, in which it won first place. "Over the years, hundreds of journals have been filled by people near and far. Once the journals are full, local

Kindred Spirit 'helpers' send the writings back to the secret originator." Russell "mentioned that when he was through writing, he thought of all the veterans that served our great nation, and all the people touched by this special place." Sheree is an award-winning writer and photographer who blogs "about all things inspirational" in Sheree's Warm Fuzzies (shereenielsen.wordpress.com). She and Russell will release their photography book Folly Beach Dances in January 2014; their photography website is oceanspiritphoto.com.

How to Build a War Hero (excerpt)

– Gerardo "Tony" Mena, Columbia, Missouri

A decorated Iraqi Freedom veteran who spent six years in Special Operations with the Renaissance Marines, Tony Mena was awarded a Navy Achievement Medal with a V for Valor for multiple acts of bravery while under fire. He is a photographer as well as a writer, and several of his photos are in Proud to Be 2. He won an Essay Honorable Mention for "the night I was re-born" during training—running an obstacle course under a merciless staff sergeant. The excerpt begins well into the course as he embarks on a 10-foot rope climb.

I grunted loudly and hoisted myself up the first two feet, locking my legs around the rope, trying to relax my arms to gather strength for the next hoist. Another two feet disappeared underneath me; then another, and another, until I was within arms reach of the pinnacle: slapping the wooden beam that anchored the rope to the sky.

As my fingers stretched and touched the wood, I laughed loudly—proudly. As an average high school student from a middle-class mid-western family, Spec Ops was my chance at greatness; a chance to achieve something that my friends back home could only dream of, and nothing could stop me, not even my own body. That is, until I peered down in preparation for my descent and the slow numbness of exhaustion began to ooze itself into the sinew of my forearms. I tried to unhook my anchor foot from the rope so that I could descend before my entire body failed, but it was too late. My fingers released the rope of their own free will, and I took flight. I assumed the gracefulness of a falling soda-machine, and I crumpled upon impact with the deceptively hard-packed sand that was meant to cushion me. My body lay there in complete exhaustion. A wadded-up dollar bill.

“End your suffering, Mena. There’s no shame in quitting,” an eerily familiar voice whispered. And when I finally opened my eyes again, my whole team was standing in a line, rucksacks on, waiting for the next event, watching my struggle unfold, waiting to see if I would quit. I spat sand out of my mouth, but even the muscles in my jaw were exhausted, and it landed on my chest in a pitiful pool, which didn’t quite have the coolness factor originally intended. I glanced over my shoulder and could now see another team that began after us, line up at the start of the o-course. I breathed in deeply, savoring that small moment of motionlessness, letting my limbs recharge with pride and hate for what was about to happen next.

***Chiaroscuro: A Reflection on the Light and Dark of Life* (excerpts)**

– *Lilah Pearce Contine, St. Charles, Missouri*

In 1941, 17-year-old Lilah Pearce volunteered for the Women’s Land Army and thus became one of Britain’s 80,000 indispensable Land Girls who replaced the farmers who had joined the military. In 1946 she married an American sailor, Paul “Bud” Contine, and came to the U.S. In Proud to Be 2, Volume 2, she not only recounts her own memories in Chiaroscuro but is interviewed by Jay Harden. Throughout the war she worked on a small dairy farm on the Isle of Wight, a prime target for enemy air strikes. In this passage, she recalls riding her bicycle in a fog when “I heard the terrifying sound of a diving plane coming in my direction.”

I could not see anything above me, but I stopped instantly, planting my feet on either side of the bike. So firmly were they planted that I could not move them if I had wanted. So ingrained with fear from the knowledge that terror always came from the skies, I was unable to release my hands from the handlebars. They felt cemented there, along with my feet that felt bolted to the ground. Paralyzed with fear, I could not move at all. I was absolutely frozen where I stood....

....Just as suddenly as the roar of the plane, and at the same time, there came a powerful blow to my shoulders that shook me to the very core and unlocked my feet. I found myself flung into a hedge off the side of the road.

I could only see a very short distance in any direction in the low-lying fog. I vaguely made out the shape of a person: man or woman, I could not tell. I was never to know, for I was never to see the face of the person who had saved me. Overhead, the fog was starting to part like a torn curtain, revealing so grotesquely, as in a nightmare, a giant gray beetle, horns spitting fire, coming straight in over the place



Lilah Pearce with one of the horses on the farm where she worked as a Land Girl during World War II

where I had been standing only a moment ago, bullets stitching a mosaic of intended death. Certainly, it had to be random, for if we could not see him, he probably could not really see us either.

Just as quickly as the plane appeared, it swept across my area of vision and out of sight, so very low that I just knew it had to crash. Like a demented thing chattering in anger, the thrum of the engine, loud and harsh, enveloped me. Then the noise receded with a parting scream as the plane fought to regain altitude. Once more, the fog thickened and the sound quickly faded, leaving the vastness around me strangely quiet once again in eerie whiteness.

Making Jello (excerpts)

– Marcia Upchurch, *Marble Hill, Missouri*

Marcia Upchurch received her B.A. in English from Southeast Missouri State University in 2013, and lives with her husband on a farm in Bollinger County. Her father, Stanley Thiele, was the cook for his company in the Korean War.

Dad once received a gallon can of powdered jello. Since there were no refrigerators, he was a bit stumped about how to make this. He mixed the powder into water in a large pot, which he and a buddy set on the rocks in a cold stream of water. They placed a large rock on the pot's lid so the current would not wash the pot over. Hours later the soldiers had jello for dessert.

Sometimes the company was on blackout alert, where they could use no lights, even inside the tents. Since Dad began preparing breakfast very early, and needed to see what he was doing, he placed a candle in the bottom of a large pot and lit it. This gave off enough light that he could see what he was doing, but not enough to alert the enemy.

The men did not always have as many candles as they needed. Dad would collect beef tallow, or fat, from the meat that he prepared. He then melted this fat and poured it into bath tissue rolls, using a shoestring for a wick. By this process he produced usable candles.

Marcia concludes her story this way.

These days Dad has trouble with knee joints that are worn out. The shoulder that reached for more than 250 mailboxes a day, six days a week, causes pain. Doctors say poor circulation in his feet is caused by too many instances of frostbite in the mountains of Korea. But Dad could make jello in those mountain streams—these small hurdles are a piece of cake.

Bald Eagle

– Aaron Horrell, *Cape Girardeau, Missouri*

Aaron Horrell is a U.S. Navy vet of the Vietnam era. He served as a member of the Seabees assisting in building airports, roads, bridges, and hospitals. Aaron is a member of Best of Missouri Hands, juried in both painting and photography. He writes a weekly newspaper column and a monthly magazine column about nature. He is owner/manager of Painted Wren Art Gallery in downtown Cape Girardeau.



Little Lead Omens

– *Tim Leach, St. Louis, Missouri*

Tim Leach was an artillery surveyor with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam, and then artillery liaison with a Vietnamese popular forces unit. He was a journalist, advertising, and public relations writer for 40 years. He won the 2009 Russell Grant Poetry Award presented by the University of Missouri–St. Louis MFA program, and his poetry has appeared in 23 journals and four regional anthologies. He is a recycle artist whose work has appeared in juried shows.

Our joyful fingers ripped the Christmas wrap
as crisp as full-dress uniforms from boxed squads
of little lead soldiers.

Sprung from dye-cut cardboard foxholes,
molded to heroic poses, our troops
always won toy wars boys waged.

Years later, little lead bullets ripped open
gifted boys grown to fight in real war—
action figures out of it.

Each lay at attention,
tagged, bagged, boxed, and sent
by air freight home,

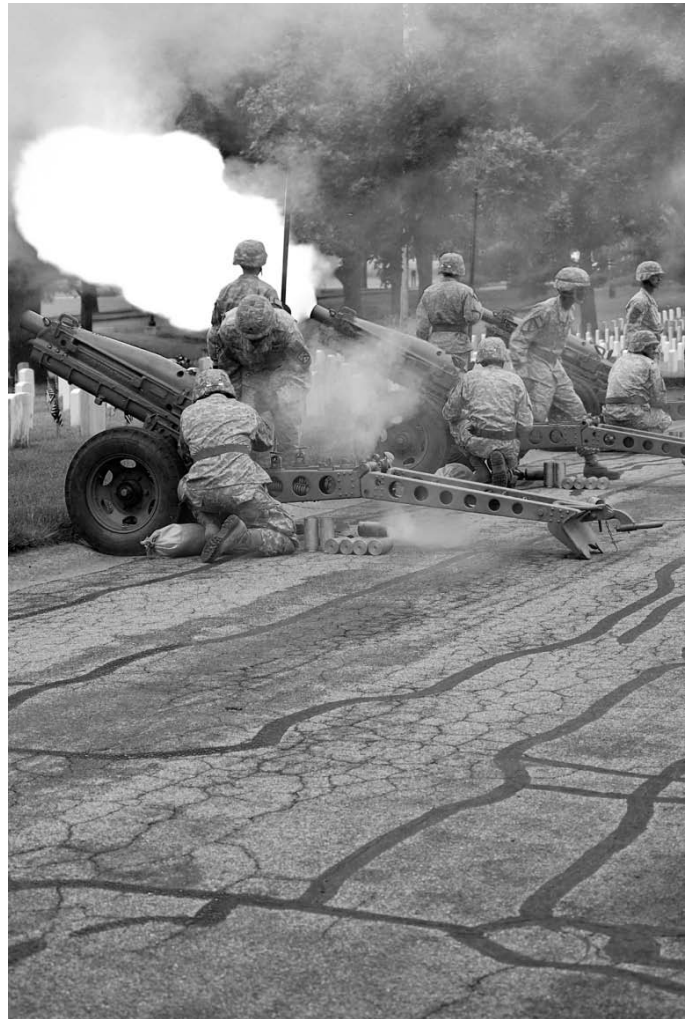
with an officer's thank-you note.
Remains were flagged, churched
and hearsed in parade-dress send-off.

Then payback: a purple heart
for his that failed, a silver star for his
unlucky one, and ribbons for tying up

loose ends—grief, anger, guilt, love
and loss. A firing squad took aim at forever
spacious sky. A bugle blew, gone the son.

Patriotic laundry, the flag was folded
by squared moves to a tri-corn pillow, for
blood, bone, and star-stitched bruise.

To the giver of toy soldiers was given back
the wrap by a wind-up troop in dress-blues,
from white gloves that left no fingerprints.



Ft. Leavenworth Cemeteries 279

– *Amanda Cherry, Iowa*

Amanda Cherry served as a medic and public affairs specialist for the Iowa Army National Guard. In 1996–1997 she was deployed to Bosnia, where she honed her skills as a photojournalist. She currently works as executive editor, board member, and writer for the website The Homefront United Network (homefrontunited.com). She adds Honorable Mention in the Proud to Be 2 photography competition to her many other photographic awards.

Afghan Eyes

– Nicholas Watts-Fernandez, Jackson, Missouri

Nicholas Watts-Fernandez is an Active Duty Navy Lieutenant who has served in two Arabian Gulf deployments, counter-narcotic deployment in South America, and a tour in Afghanistan. Married with two sons, ages 4 and 6, he is currently stationed in Millington, Tennessee, at Navy Personnel Command. A Missouri native, he received his B.A. and M.A. from Southeast Missouri State University.

i was six
when i saw
the national geographic
photo of her
piercing hazel eyes
shrouded in sorrow
immeasurable pain, anguish
i fell in love

my innocent ignorance
did not understand
war, russia, afghanistan
only her beauty
and her pain

25 years later
i'm in country
nato training mission
children suicide bombers
taliban spring offensive
shell rung ears
dust blind eyes

wander broken street
burnt buildings hollow
gaping windows staring
sniper points, shadows
choking smoke, death

and she's nowhere to be found



Woman Marine

– DeVonna R. Allison, Michigan

This is Corporal Allison in 1983 at Camp Rilea in Oregon. She met her husband, Earl, while serving in the Marines. They have been married 32 years and have raised four children. DeVonna is a freelance writer.

By the Dawn's Early Light (excerpt)

– Les Thompson, Troy, Missouri

Les Thompson is a retired Vietnam-era Navy Senior Chief with 21 years in naval aviation, having served on five aircraft carriers. He is a member of a writing group in St. Peters, but says By the Dawn's Early Light "is his first attempt at a publishable work." The story is fiction, but based Les' father in World War II as an aircraft carrier gunner—"WC."

The buzz of aircraft engines had faded and the guns were silent. WC could hear the cries of the wounded and see the flashlights cutting a lighted path as men on stretchers were carried to sick bay or to a

temporary morgue on the hangar bay below. WC looked around and noticed a guy he thought he knew on the gun next to him.

He called out, "Hey Wiggins, that you?"

"Yeah, man, it's me. You OK?"

"I don't know just yet. I don't think I'm bleeding anywhere and I don't feel no pain or nothing."

"Yeah, I don't think I got hit either."

The leading gunner's mate came around checking on his men and damaged guns. After he left, WC and Wiggins sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Wiggins spoke.

"The ship's hit bad. We're moving way too slow and we're circling. What do you think is gonna happen next?"

WC swallowed and pushed the bile in his throat back down, then said, "The Japs ain't done yet. We can't get our planes back aboard, so we can't re-arm and re-fuel them to help protect us. Anything left flying probably diverted to one of the other carriers."

"That kind of makes us worthless don't it?" said Wiggins. "An aircraft carrier is no good without any planes."

WC pondered Wiggins's words, then said, "Wiggins, I don't know where our planes went, but when the sun comes up, it's us gunners against the Jap warplanes. It's up to me and you, shipmate."

Wiggins was silent for a while, then said, "You a praying man, WC?"

"Well, I haven't done too much of it in my life. My mama, made me go to church with the family when I was little, but lately my life is no example of a praying man."

"Me neither," said Wiggins, "I never been in a church in my life, but since you got some experience, would you mind saying a prayer now?"

"Wiggins, from what little I learned, you don't need no experience to pray. Why don't we both say our own silent prayer right now, that way we got two going at the same time. I remember somewhere in the Scriptures that two was better than one." Wiggins nodded, but remained quiet. WC bowed his head and began asking that his life be spared. Both WC and Wiggins did not say another word. Each was considering his future. WC looked at his watch again; it was zero-four-twenty-two. Maybe another hour and the dawn would show the Japs exactly where they were at.

The Only Home

– Levi Bollinger, Jackson, Missouri

Levi Bollinger is currently teaching high school in an international school in Jakarta, Indonesia. He served a tour of duty in Baghdad in 2003-2004 and has published several poems based on his experience there. The Only Home received a special award as a Missouri Humanities Council Recognition Winner.

Sun slipped through the lattice,
marking yellow streaks through
the swirling motes before splashing
across the red-checked tablecloth,
where a pot of chai steamed into
the tense, hushed air.

Five soldiers had gathered in the only
home we would visit that year, had
crowded sweating onto threadbare
cushions of a squatting couch, had
rifles resting between tight thighs,
and nodded quietly to everything.

Our translator picked up the glass cups,
poured the steaming chai, so hot
the bubbles ran the leaves in torrents
within, and the glass singed calloused
fingertips. A wide smile spread into
the fleshy folds of his mother's face. She
gestured in silence, in dangling jewelry,
and slid a plate of pastries toward my
nervous knees.

I have wished many times to return to that home, to speak once to that
mother kindly
of her chai, of her home, of her son. To ask and to repeat and to engrave the
names of
her daughters, too shy to speak, to lift their dark jewels of eyes from combat
boots
fidgeting on the ornate patterns of the woven rug underfoot, on my mind.

I have wished time and again to return to that home and memorize its chai's
spice, its lilting
voice, its kitchen's tile and iron-lattice windows and scriptures inscribed in
filigree, twisting
as vines, its sprouts of weeds and scratching chickens in the dust of the yard,
and the delicate crumble of the pastry under my foreign tongue.

I have wished with so many fervent wishes to know that home still stands,
unrocked,
unbattered, unbloodied by intervening suns and stars seeing silently the
seething
violence of a world I understood so little.

I have wished those quivering shy and earnest sisters of our translator to live
in smiles,
to blossom in embrace of gentle husbands and spill liquid laughs from parted
lips over
chai they shared with clumsy Americans.

The translation of Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters is by M. Hamburger from Bertolt Brecht, Poems 1913-1956, Methuen, N.Y., London, 1976. The entire poem is [here](#).

The artwork and photos from Proud to Be: Writings by American Warriors, Volume 2 are courtesy of Southeast Missouri State University Press. The artwork from the Combat Paper Project and Veteran Print Project Creative Conversations workshops in St. Louis is courtesy of VSA Missouri.

Missouri Books Unlock the Personal Stories of American Warriors was created in November 2013 for the [Missouri Arts Council](#), a state agency and division of the Department of Economic Development. The Missouri Arts Council provides grants to nonprofit organizations that meet our strategic goals of increasing participation in the arts in Missouri, growing Missouri's economy using the arts, and strengthening Missouri education through the arts. Contact moarts@ded.mo.gov.



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