

## A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



*Habibi Hhaloua, Exit 12 Dance Company. Photo: Joanne Levey*

### Art in Service: Supporting the Military Community and Changing the Public Narrative

By Maranatha Bivens

*Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced a wave of returning veterans suffering from both physical and emotional traumas as well as families, communities, and a society in need of ways to understand, adjust, and heal. Writer and “former military kid” Maranatha Bivens characterizes ways that art is raising awareness of the issues facing service members, bridging gaps in knowledge and communication between veterans and civilians, and offering veterans paths to healing and reintegration in family and community life.*

*Artists are creating work that enriches the public narrative about service, military culture, and the politics and effects of war through commentary, bearing witness, and protest. A breadth of artistic engagement at the personal and organizational level includes: documentary and classical theater, original artworks made from the pulp of old uniforms, and documentation of war zone graffiti, to name just a few examples. Some of the most compelling work is led and created by veterans themselves. Arts and creativity are being applied significantly as tools for health and well being. The National Initiative for Arts and Health in the Military brings together the military branches with civilian agencies and nonprofits to advance policy and practice toward integrating arts in holistic treatment. On the ground, creative arts therapists, artists, and arts organizations work across the military lifecycle, providing therapeutic and educational services. Finally, the paper reflects on how the arts may be applied as a tool for diplomacy to build transnational community connections, bridge cultural distinctions, and contribute to economic vitality.*

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As a nation, we have faced two world wars, several country-to-country wars, a war within our own borders, and dozens of conflicts across the globe. Each incidence called for people's engagement, either actively as military service members or implicitly as private citizens, a divide that has at times created cultural dissonance.

With a family member serving in every war since World War II, and growing up in an Army family, I've looked at our country's major conflicts from inside the bubble of the military community. Defying convention and stereotype, my brother, my sister, and I have all gone into artistic career fields. I can't speak for them, but one of the main reasons I write is to create a link between my perspective and that of the greater civilian community, which I haven't always been able to understand or feel part of. But the military is now far from a niche community. Today's all-volunteer force has 1.4 million active duty service members (DMDC Report, 2012) and nearly 400,000 members of National Guard and Reserve components. More than two million service members have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since September 11, 2001, and as these conflicts come to a close, troops are returning home in high numbers. Combat operations in Afghanistan are scheduled to end in 2014, and a gradual drawdown of the 68,000 troops still deployed has already started. This influx of returning service members is unprecedented, and they will join an estimated 23 million citizens already classified as veterans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In what ways can communities be prepared to support their needs?

In recent history, artistic expression has been a poignant method of communication and connection. Think of Vietnam-era America. What comes to mind? Whether it's a photo, a monument, the notes of a popular song of the time, or a piercing mental picture from a short story, there is a rich well of imagery that elicits response even today. That's the power of artistic engagement: the ability to put images, words, or sound to those emotions that might otherwise stay dormant within us. What images will we look back on in 50 years, when the wars of this era are long behind us? How will we have resolved the conflicts internally? What will we read that reflects the struggles of this time? Who will write it? With our country now at war for 11 years, there is an incredible breadth of artistic engagement at the personal and organizational level in the national discourse about military conflict overseas and its effects on the people back home. These expressions emanate from both our nation's artistic community and from within the military community itself.

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## **RAISING AWARENESS & ENGAGING THE CIVILIAN COMMUNITY**

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More than a decade after the events of 9/11 and the wars that ensued, the repercussions still hold daily significance for military service members and their families. Many civilians have lost the sense of unity that immediately followed 9/11 and have not stayed informed and engaged, as the wars have endured more than a decade and domestic issues become more pressing daily. Awareness efforts in the current climate have taken many different forms and are instigated by individual artists, organizations, and veterans themselves.

***In this context, artists are creating art that seeks to enrich the public narrative about the politics of war, service, military culture, and the effects of war on those actively engaged as well as those left behind.*** In the [Graffiti of War Project](#), artworks created by soldiers while they served in Iraq and Afghanistan provide an alternative kind of response and public insight to their immediate experiences in war zones.

Jaeson Parsons started the Graffiti of War Project after he returned from Iraq, where he served as an Army medic, and found that not all of his therapy needs could be met through the Veterans Affairs hospital. Sparked by the off-hand and impromptu thoughts and artwork scrawled on the latrine walls in Iraq and Afghanistan, Graffiti of War has evolved into a collection of original artworks and photos of war zone graffiti by service members. Project organizers traveled to bases in Iraq and Afghanistan to document and preserve the murals and makeshift memorials painted by troops. The photos capture moments in time, reveal troop morale, and forge connection with the outside community. The collected works are part of a traveling exhibition, and submissions are still encouraged.



Daddy Loves You, photo taken at Camp Taji, Iraq, 2009. Submitted to The Graffiti of War Project by Eric Turnbull, who wrote: "It represents the sentiments of all military dads who are deployed. I sent this to my daughter as a message to her." Photo: Courtesy of The Graffiti of War Project

***A number of professional artists and performers without a direct service affiliation are inspired to create work that gives voice to military personnel and that reaches out to the civilian community.*** Be it through painting, writing, or performance, these artists have used their artistic abilities as a conduit for the unexpressed thoughts, words, and emotions of veterans, fallen service members, and their families.

Through the [100 Faces of War Experience](#), artist Matt Mitchell will ultimately tell the story of 100 people who have served in, as well as civilians who have traveled to, the theater of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each traditional portrait painting is accompanied by a flash account written by the subjects themselves. These tales come in the form of brief re-enactments, emails, letters home, journal entries, and reflections, like that of a girl in her early 20s who never thought enlisting would actually call her into action. Or a journal entry written during one service member's first days in Afghanistan. Or one woman's casual letter to her nieces back home, asking them to write. The viewer is moved by the formal and intimate feel of the painting and by the accompanying words that allow a glimpse of what's beyond the picture. 100 Faces of War is a work in progress, with 60 of the 100 portraits completed to date. The

project has been exhibited in phases and in collaboration with other artists, in conjunction with panels about issues veterans face, and frequently as a focal point for dialogue about the wars. The project is slowly contributing to a more complete narrative that asks viewers to contemplate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through the experiences of these Americans.

Theater has long been a medium used for both entertainment and discussions about the most pressing issues of our time. In this era of war, several theater companies and projects have also elevated the stories of those who have served to address personal and social issues that have taken hold in the aftermath.

[American Records Theater Company](#) created *ReEntry*, a play by Emily Ackerman and K.J. Sanchez. Composed entirely from the words of Marines and their families, the play is considered documentary theater in its retelling of actual events and personal insights. The audience gets direct insight into the minds of service members and their families. With divisions between service members and civilians existing even within families, this theater experience creates the occasion for mothers to understand the decisions of sons and daughters, and for neighbors to gain perspective on members of their community. *ReEntry* has been performed at military installations and community theaters across the country, playing to audiences both bearing witness for the first time and those feeling the bittersweet pangs of recognition or familiarity.



American Records' *ReEntry* at Centerstage, Baltimore. P.J. Sosko as John. Photo: Richard Anderson

Similarly, [Kore Press](#), whose mission is to present women as agents of social change, produced *Coming in Hot*, a play adapted for the stage from *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks from Vietnam to Iraq*, a collection of personal essays and poetry from female service members about the horrors, humor, boredom, and bonds commonly shared in war zones. Rarely does work focus on the perspective of women, one of the military's largest minority groups, and rarely is it led by those who have experienced the story firsthand. The play was adapted into a one-woman show by Shannon Cain, Lisa Bowden, and Jeanmarie Simpson, who is also the lead performer. *Coming in Hot* not only raises awareness, but acts to trigger discussions about aspects of war often left out of the greater dialogue.

While the previous examples reflect how contemporary devised theater (theater created from a collaborative process) can be especially effective in promoting understanding and dialogue, so, too, can classical plays. [Theater of War](#) is a project of [Outside the Wire](#), a company that uses theater and other media to analyze and confront the social issues of various communities. Combat-related physical and psychological issues are not easy topics to approach with the general public. Theater of War seeks to broach some of these controversial issues by wrapping them within the stories of the Greek plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, which depict similar themes. In

Sophocles' *Ajax*, written sometime between 450–430 B.C., the title character faces the struggle of returning to society with the horrors of his actions weighing heavily on his ability to effectively assimilate, as do many soldiers returning home from war. Working through the shame of being tricked by Athena into committing a crime, Ajax is ultimately unable to shirk the guilt of his actions and commits suicide.

The plot is timeless and the issues universal. When performed before civilian and military communities across the United States, Europe, and Japan, the play is a platform or catalyst for a greater discussion about the at times devastating impact of war on individuals, families, and the surrounding community. Like Ajax, many service members feel a certain amount of shame surrounds seeking psychological help; Theater of War aims to destigmatize this need by raising awareness and sparking discussions. An empathetic community fosters resiliency for service men and women working through post-deployment issues.

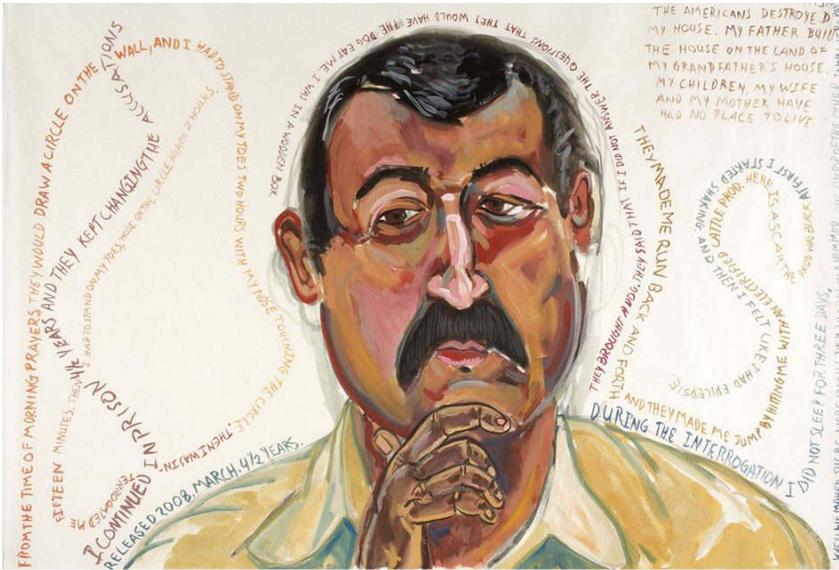


Theater of War. From left to right: David Straithairn, Elizabeth Marvel, Terrence Howard, Adam Driver, Bryan Doerries. Joint Dept. of Defense/VA Mental Health Summit, October 2009. The Shakespeare Theatre Company, Lansburgh Theatre. Photo: Paxton Winters

Theater of War has presented more than 200 productions of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to more than 40,000 veterans, active duty service members, military families, and caregivers. Readings have been held everywhere—from Guantanamo Bay and the Pentagon to churches, high school auditoriums, university campuses, museums, and theater organizations in communities across the country. Readings are always stimulating and lively events; a town-hall style discussion follows every performance.

***Artists are also raising awareness through creating work that comments on U.S. engagement and the nature of war, bears witness, and whose presence acts as a form of protest.***

Seeking to explore the United States' war on terror from a different perspective, Daniel Heyman's [Bearing Witness](#) presents 20 portraits of detainees from Abu Ghraib. Heyman started down an investigative path when he, as an American citizen, felt the information being presented about the Iraq War and surrounding conflicts was not presented as plainly as it could be. Heyman, a painter and printmaker, traveled to Amman and Istanbul with human-rights lawyers to conduct interviews with former detainees, whose words are also incorporated in the paintings.



Daniel Heyman, "The Broomstick Was Metal," 2008, from the touring exhibition Bearing Witness. Photo: Paul Rider, courtesy of the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects

As the men told their stories, Heyman quickly sketched portraits that reflected the pain and weight of their personal experiences. By creating an image and a voice for each nameless person at the heart of the terrible headlines of 2003 and 2004, Heyman allows viewers to face these men on a personal level and creates a more rounded vision of war. Bearing Witness has been exhibited in several galleries.

[Split This Rock](#), a poetry festival named for a line in a Langston Hughes poem, uses the medium

of poetry to focus on social issues and injustices in a creative way. The Split This Rock Festival was born from DC Poets Against the War, an organization that banded together in reaction to the U.S. entry into Iraq in 2003.

Organizer Sarah Browning felt that poetry, a medium known for layered meaning and complex imagery, could serve to express the complex outrage, sadness, and anxieties associated with the Iraq War. After an initial reading at a Unitarian church in the city, the program caught fire, growing into a collective of poets and like-minded civilians working in academia, those already engaged in the community, and students new to the craft of writing. In 2008, DC Poets Against the War partnered with Busboys and Poets, Sol & Soul, and the Institute for Policy Studies to put poetry on a national stage.

Split This Rock's annual festivals feature workshops, panel discussions, and activism activities centered on celebrating the connective power of poetry and the poet as an agent of social change in the community. Festivals are held every two years in Washington, DC, and have brought filmmakers, famous writers, students, activists, and other public figures together to form a network of socially engaged artists.

In 2008, photographer Suzanne Opton took photos of ten soldiers to give people the opportunity to gaze into the faces of men who have seen the atrocities of war. The [Soldier Billboard Project](#), as it was later called, presents intimate portraits of soldiers from the neck up, their heads in resting positions, in effect asking the viewer to think about their own opinions about war and the experiences of service members and their families. Displayed on large billboards in major cities across the country, the portraits create an unavoidable intersection between daily life (one is featured above a fast food restaurant in Houston) and the conflicts

simultaneously experienced by those that have returned from war and the people who love them.

Opton continues this dialogue in other projects, including [Soldier + Citizen](#) and [Many Wars](#). Both are series that use portraits of former service members to create a framework for discussing the physical and physiological issues that linger long after combat. Many Wars profiles those who fought in World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, and Iraq and Afghanistan and the stories that continue to haunt them long after their experience. Soldier + Citizen positions these men on one side of a split screen, with Iraqi citizens that fled upon the U.S. invasion on the other. Using text from interviews with the Iraqi citizens, viewers are given context for one side of an image's story and left to interpret the soldiers' side on their own.

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## ADVANCING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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Although relatively young, the United States remains one of the most multifaceted and evolving cultures in the world. Our worldview and doctrines often dramatically differ from those of other countries and cultures. Complicating the picture is that many see our increasing global interdependence as a threat to economic or national security—through job loss or importing hostilities. There are, however, important ways the arts can help moderate the complexities of globalization.

The 2009 Americans for the Arts National Arts Policy Roundtable at Sundance looked at expanding the vision for how the arts can strengthen international relations—not only as a tool for diplomacy, but as a transformational lever to build transnational community connections, bridge cultural distinctions, and contribute to economic vitality. Among the core questions discussed in this forum was how can cultural exchange be used to strengthen foreign affairs and policy—and, most importantly, can there be a role for art as it concerns military conflict and military communities abroad?

At the roundtable, Brigadier General Nolen Bivens (U.S. Army, Ret.) posited such a role for the arts by integrating them into Phase Zero activities (Security Cooperation Operations) in support of U.S. National Security Strategy, stating, “An end state for a strategy to increase the arts role in cultural diplomacy could be the prevention of conflicts through art exchange and expression.” In Phase Zero, the goal is to prevent conflicts from initially occurring. He went on to suggest several strategic collaborations between the arts and military communities to promote stability and build capacity in partner nations through greater interagency and nongovernmental coordination.

Many conflicts rise out of basic misunderstandings, and the kinds of conflicts that lead to war often spring from a basic cultural disconnect. This is not meant to diminish the very real differences that allow issues to escalate between nations, but basic ignorance can add layers to

the inter-country rancor. At the roundtable, Bivens suggested that if U.S. military personnel were armed with basic knowledge of the customs and culture of the countries being entered, perhaps this conflict-inducing disconnect could be staunched.

***Several programs and organizations are placing a creative explanatory approach at the center of their missions to bridge communities through historical context, with hope that progression is possible if we simply look through a different lens.***

Tricycle Theater's [The Great Game: Afghanistan](#) seeks to create understanding and stimulate discussion by educating the viewer about Afghan culture and history. *The Great Game* is made up of twelve "playlets" about the history of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, spanning conflicts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The sections are connected by documentary theater, with monologues based on actual text from public figures involved in the contemporary conflicts. Broken into three major sections with four mini-plays in each, *The Great Game* was first produced in 2009 in London and had a successful run in the United States in 2011. By giving audiences an historical context in which to frame the current conflict, the play forces viewers to create a more fully realized notion of the country instead of allowing them to base their opinions solely on what they are shown in the news.

After seeing performances during the show's run at the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Sidney Harman Hall in Washington, DC, several high-ranking service members brought back rave reviews to top military officials at the Pentagon. They believed that the plays approached the effects of war in an honest way that could be informative for the unfamiliar and revealing for those who have lived through the experience. After a meeting at the Pentagon with Tricycle Theater's artistic director, the group decided to put on a special two-day engagement of performances with audiences made up entirely of active duty service members, veterans, and military officials. Such a positive reception from senior military leadership shows a willingness to adopt or consider new ways to approach cultural diplomacy and combat. The plays were also received well in the military community, further underscoring the impact that alternative or innovative outreach efforts can have just by having the opportunity to be presented.



*Habibi Hhaloua*, Exit 12 Dance Company. Photo: Joanne Levey

Artistic talent and military service might seem like disparate passions, but they can exist in one person. Across the country, there are a growing number of returning veterans who have found a second career in the arts—where their military service and experiences have shaped their artistic voice.

Take Roman Baca, a professional ballet dancer who put his dance career aside and enlisted in the Marines in 2000. He was deployed to Fallujah in 2005 and by the time his tour was over, he thought he would not dance again. In a February 2013 [Village Voice](#) feature story, Baca described the anxiety, anger, and depression he experienced upon his return home: “When my girlfriend sat me down, instead of saying, ‘It’s over,’ she said, ‘Let’s figure out what we can do to fix this. If you could do anything in the world, and you didn’t have to worry about money or time, what would you do?’ I told her I’d start a dance company. And so we did.”

He formed [Exit 12 Dance Company](#), which focuses on nonverbal communication to bridge communities and healing through creative expression. Baca has choreographed several productions about the issues faced by service members and their families. *Homecoming* is a ballet about war’s effects on families based on letters Baca and his family wrote to each other. During the dance, the letters are read. Baca describes, “The dancing is everything the letters don’t say—the loss, the longing.” Another work, called *Conflicted*, is about the relationship between the American military and the Iraqi people. Baca’s personal healing has been made possible not only by his return to dance but also by his return to Iraq. Through a fellowship awarded by [Battery Dance Company](#), which works overseas with support from the U.S. State Department, Baca has led dance workshops with Kurdish and Arab youth. They created a dance about what it is like to live through a war, their perceptions of Americans, and their hopes for a better future. The piece was performed for hundreds in the Iraqi and military communities, members of the Ministry of Culture in Iraq, and members of the U.S. Consulate. As Baca has seamlessly connected his experience of dance and war to find his own peace, he and Exit 12 Dance Company exemplify the possibilities of cultural diplomacy.

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## PROMOTING HEALTH, WELLNESS, AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION

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The effects of war are often not left in war zones. Whether the wounds of war are physical or emotional, service members and their families have quietly taken on extraordinary stresses and hardships, with long-lasting impact. With more than two million service members having deployed since 2001, and unprecedented numbers returning home from conflict, concerns that may once have stayed in the home are now emerging in the consciousness of local community members and the country as a whole. The chances of everything returning to “normal” are slim, but the arts can help build toward an enriched “new normal.”

Numerous invaluable resources are available to assist with mental health and wellness issues with a more traditional approach. Yet the arts provide a unique multidisciplinary alternative that improves the healthcare experience for patients, families, and caregivers. Today literary, performing, and visual arts and design are effectively employed in a variety of healthcare and community settings—including those focused on the military. Creative arts practitioners, including therapists, artists, educators, consultants, and arts organizations, work across the military lifecycle to provide programs as well as therapeutic and educational services in diverse

settings—from military bases to rehabilitation treatment and veterans’ facilities, long-term care, and hospice.

The arts have a great way of getting people to say what they didn’t know they needed to, allowing them to express deep-seated emotions and to heal. Studies reveal that service members and veterans who have opportunities to express themselves and share their stories cope better with the most serious effects of today’s conflicts, including post-traumatic stress (PTS), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and major depression. Arts engagement demonstrates positive effects in improving sleep behavior, impulse control, and concentration, and in lessening depression and anxiety (Wissing, 2009). By serving as a protective factor, the arts are even showing promise in mitigating the most tragic consequence of war—the rising number of suicides (Mental Health America, 2012).

***Military medical centers throughout the country are recognizing the value of the arts, not only for military service members and their families, but for staff as well.***

Leading the way are the [Walter Reed National Military Center](#) (WRNMMC) and the Department of Defense’s [National Intrepid Center of Excellence](#) (NICoE), located on the WRNMMC campus. WRNMMC has instituted a growing number of arts programs for service members, staff, and families. The Stages of Healing monthly performance series hosted by the WRNMMC Department of Psychiatry includes bedside performances in individual wards and patient

rooms, as well as drama, workshops, musical performances, lectures/readings, and pop-up concerts in high-traffic areas of the hospital. Through ArtStream’s Allies in the Arts and the Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, artists work with service members, their families, and hospital staff at bedside and in group settings in a variety of artistic disciplines on WRNMMC’s wounded service members’ ward.

In recognition of the contribution of the built environment to healing, WRNMMC used an existing courtyard space between two buildings to construct a Healing Garden. The space incorporates a combination of open and closed spaces to elicit a multisensory experience, and it includes positive distractions such as a one-story water wall and an enclosed glass atrium that acts as a transition space. A series of stone ramps, sloped gardens, and a large reflecting pool enhance and have a relaxing effect within the sensitive patient environment.



The labyrinth meditation room at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence in Bethesda, MD. Photo: Courtesy of NICoE

The National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) at Walter Reed focuses on service members and their families dealing with TBI and psychological health conditions. It provides cutting-edge evaluation, treatment planning, research, and education through a holistic patient-centered approach; a certified art therapist, as part of the

treatment team, leads the [Healing Arts Program](#). A four-week arts curriculum was built into the holistic care model; it includes mask-making, montages, and expressive writing sessions led by a combat-veteran writer. Individualized sessions are supported with weekly group sessions, and the art studio is outfitted with art and writing supplies, a piano, an electronic drum set, and multiple guitars. The studio also serves as a community space open to service members whenever group or individual therapy is not in session.

In the first week of NICoE's Healing Arts program, service members are encouraged to make masks and write about their masks as a way to process the identity struggles they may be facing as they begin the program. According to resident art therapist, Melissa Walker, most service members say that making masks was their "aha" moment, a first foray into exploring the arts and really exploring themselves.

Photo: Courtesy of NICoE



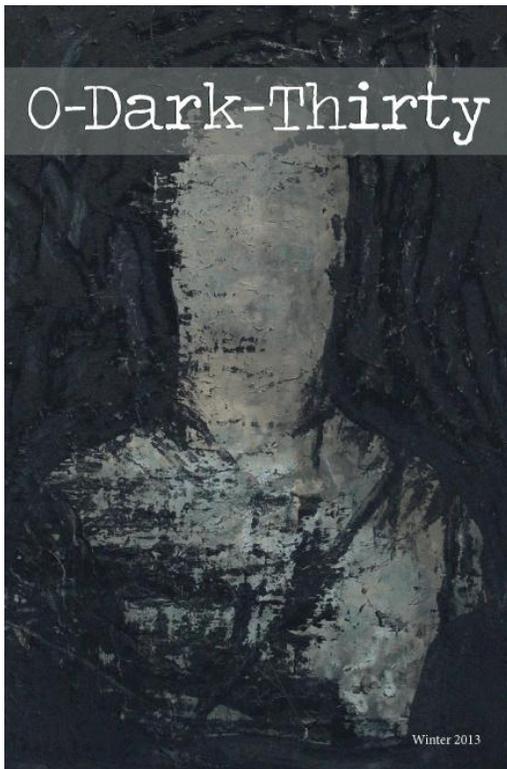
As impressive and as valuable as these programs are within the military treatment facility setting, the reality is that patients spend a relatively short amount of time in these treatment facilities before moving on to veterans' facilities and fully reintegrating into the community. When effectively employed in a community setting, the arts offer lifelong opportunities for service members, veterans, and their families not only to address but also to transcend the transitions that individuals experience in the military environment.

***Across the nation, programs utilizing all artistic disciplines are building resilience by helping children and family members adjust to a loved one's deployment, by assisting veterans transitioning from military to civilian life, and even by contributing to employment and workforce development.*** Here are a few exemplary programs in writing, visual art, and music disciplines.

## Writing

A partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Department of Defense has made [Operation: Homecoming](#) an important component of rehabilitation and recovery. Starting with a writing workshop built into the critical phase of rehabilitation for troops, Operation: Homecoming is then opened up to also allow family members the opportunity to share their experiences through memoir, fiction, poetry, journal entries, and essays. The program started as an NEA initiative in 2004, bringing high-profile writers to teach workshops at military installations at home and abroad. After an open call for writing submissions from those who have served since 9/11, 10,000 pages of submissions were anthologized into the collection *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*. The initiative was also the basis of *Operation*

*Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, a documentary film included in PBS's *America at a Crossroads* series.



[O-Dark-Thirty](#) journal, Winter 2013.  
Cover art by Joe Olney.

Based in Washington, DC, the [Veterans Writing Project](#) (VWP) envisions that “a new wave of great literature is coming and much of that will be written by veterans and their families.” It aims to put as many of these stories in front of as many readers as possible. With the knowledge that returning warriors have known for centuries the healing power of narrative, VWP gives veterans the skills they need to capture their stories and to do so in an environment of mutual trust and respect. It provides free workshops for veterans, active duty, and reserve service members and their families. With a core curriculum based on a craft book written by and taught by veterans, participants learn about the elements of writing fiction and nonfiction from those who have written through a similar perspective. Veterans Writing Project also has an online community called O-Dark Thirty, whose quarterly literary journal accepts submissions of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction from veterans, service members, and their families year-round.

The Writers Guild Foundation (WGF) holds an annual retreat for veterans and active duty service members

known as the [Military Veterans Writing Workshop](#). WGF provides an outlet for those returning from war who might have difficulties transitioning back to the civilian community. WGF’s writing workshop allows service members to work through troubling experiences and to mine their creative talent by strengthening their writing ability with guidance from professional screen, television, and novel writers. The retreats host 50 to 60 service member writers and 25 to 30 mentor writers. For those based in the Los Angeles area, the Military Veterans Writing Workshop continues to meet for monthly small-group meetings to further shape their work.

See Also: [Veterans Voices](#), [Veterans Writing Workshop](#)

## Visual Arts

[Combat Paper](#) uses artistic innovation to acknowledge the significance military uniforms hold. Instead of leaving uniforms—canvases of a distinctive type already covered in symbolism—to hang and gather dust at the back of a closet, Combat Paper tears, processes, and transforms uniforms into actual paper on which artists project their emotions.

Veterans participate in a five-day workshop learning to remake their uniforms into pulp and then form sheets of paper to be used as personal journals, canvases for silk screening or painting, or in other forms of visual storytelling. “Combat papermakers” work from the inside

out, attempting to reconcile personal issues from their combat experience through art before moving on to work with a broader focus to bridge gaps of knowledge and communication between civilian and veteran communities. The works created in and inspired by these workshops have been powerful tools for conversation and expression, and the pieces have found homes in gallery showcases and installations across the country. The project is based in California, and since its inception the Combat Paper workshop has made four stops in Michigan, Texas, Nevada, Washington, DC, New York, and Kosovo. The results of Combat Paper projects show it is possible to transfer and process existing emotions into a new dialogue while creating an entirely new product from an existing item.



Combat Paper, silkscreen printing using overbeaten cotton fiber. Photo: [Combat Paper](#)

Founded by drama therapist and social artist Lisa Rosenthal, the [Vet Art Project](#) gives military members and their families the opportunity to work with artists to create art about their experience with war as a means for processing personal issues. In addition to therapeutic creative arts workshops, Vet Art Project mounts community discussions and public performances of new art by veterans and veteran and artist collaborative teams, which are followed by talkbacks with veteran participants. To date, thousands of families, artists, and community members have participated in projects across the country. Seminars and workshops include topics such as mindfulness training, stress reduction, women warriors, and veteran families.

*See Also: [American Healing Arts Foundation](#), [Operation Oak Tree](#), [Foundation for Art & Healing](#), [SHOUT! For Women Veterans](#)*

## Music

The [Center for American Military Music Opportunities](#) (CAMMO) fosters and nurtures the musical talent of veterans and active duty service members by providing them with opportunities to train, record, and perform with professionals. CAMMO brings veterans together with industry experts and helps them work toward career opportunities they might not otherwise connect with.

CAMMO provides music therapy for those who need it most while giving them the tools to work toward a future in the music industry. The Center is raising funds to create a large hub for training and recording in Nashville, TN, and continues to manage veteran bands and individual artists.

For deployed service members, music can have a therapeutic quality, allowing them some respite in high intensity situations. Returning service members are looking for ways to incorporate music therapy into their reintegration experience. [Voices of Valor](#) offers an eight-week music course for veterans at Rutgers University. Attendees work with a team of musicians and psychology graduate students in small groups to create an original song, thus blending veterans' personal stories into a collective work they perform and record. Veterans with a wide range of music experience (or none) can benefit from the experience by having the opportunity to nurture an unknown talent, or simply to use an alternative method to work through challenges faced as they transition into the civilian community.

See Also: [Operation Harmony](#), [Combat Vet Productions](#), [Guitars for Vets](#), [Rock 4 Recovery](#), [Musicorps](#)



### [National Initiative for Arts and Health in the Military](#)

By Marete Wester, Americans for the Arts

*This is a rare moment. For the first time in history, society has indicated the willingness to take an active and critical role in empathizing with our service members and veterans and what they and their families have endured through war and transition. The intent of these recommendations is to open up a cross-sector dialogue that encourages individuals and organizations to find the ways and means to act individually and collectively in support of this bold and promising Initiative.*

**(The Arts: A Promising Solution to Meeting the Military Challenges of Today—A Report from the Arts and Health in the Military National Roundtable.**

Americans for the Arts, April 10, 2013)

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced a wave of veterans returning from combat suffering from both physical and emotional traumas. These military service men and women—many of whom are in their 20s and early 30s—face a lifetime of challenges ranging from post-traumatic stress to the loss of a limb, brain injuries, depression, emotional distress, or post-war life readjustment.

Recognizing that the sheer scope of challenges require more than medical treatment to resolve, an unprecedented group of national leaders from military, government, and nonprofit military, health, and arts service organizations came together in 2011 to hold the first **National Summit: Arts in Healing for Warriors** at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) and the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE). Hosted by Rear Admiral Alton L. Stocks, the summit marked the first time multiple branches of the military collaborated with civilian agencies and nonprofit partners to discuss how the arts offer solutions to address key health issues our military faces.

Based on the success of the summit, in 2012 these partners established the **National Initiative for Arts and Health in the Military**. Americans for the Arts is managing the initiative in collaboration with the WRNMMC and a 14-member national steering committee of nonprofit, military, and federal agencies, among them the National Endowment for the Arts and the Global Alliance for Arts & Health. The multiyear initiative is designed to:

- advance the policy, practice, and quality use of arts and creativity as tools for health in the military;
- raise visibility, understanding, and support of arts and health in the military; and
- make the arts as tools for health available to all active duty military, staff, family members, and veterans.

The multiyear initiative incorporates a series of national convenings, policy development, publications, technical assistance, and training resources. The first of the policy events, the *Arts & Health in the Military National Roundtable*, took place on November 15, 2012. The roundtable convened 22 high-level leaders from the military, federal agencies, and civilian private and nonprofit agencies to create a framework for a national action plan that will ensure the availability of arts interventions for service men and women and their families, and integrate the arts as part of the “Standard of Care” in military clinical settings (VA and military hospitals) as well as programs in community settings across the country. The meeting was hosted at the Kennedy Center by **Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith**, and co-chaired by **Robert L. Lynch**, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts and **Anita B. Boles**, executive director of the Global Alliance for Arts & Health. The **David R. Rockefeller Foundation** funded the production of a “Blueprint for Action” that outlines the major results and recommendations from the discussion. The blueprint, *The Arts: A Promising Solution to Meeting the Military Challenges of Today—A Report from the Arts and Health in the Military National Roundtable*, was released at the second **National Summit: Arts, Health and Well-Being Across the Military Continuum**, held at the WRNMMC on April 10<sup>th</sup> and is available from Americans for the Arts.

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## BUILDING RESILIENCE WITH ARTS, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT

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Seventy percent of service members and their families do not live on or near a military installation. While military families maintain such a strong physical presence in the civilian community, often the civilian community itself has no direct connection to the military lifestyle. As a result, many military families are left feeling isolated and misunderstood. Some arts programs are offering multifaceted ways beyond the typical “lend a helping hand” to aid displaced service members and their families to become vital and active community members. These hybrid programs consist of high-profile awareness activities coupled with practical tools to assist veterans, service members, and their families in obtaining education, employment, and integration into the community.

[Veteran Artist Program](#) (VAP) created Vets on Sets, an initiative to allow veterans the opportunity to bring their artistic talents to the entertainment industry. VAP seeks partnerships with local, regional, and national producers to hire veterans with skill sets that would easily translate to positions behind the camera. In addition, VAP heightens visibility for the creative work of military artists. The Visual Artist program helps veterans connect their work to exhibition opportunities that include a spring 2013 exhibit at the Pentagon. Be it through painting, writing, joining a media crew, or theater performance, this program helps military veterans become active agents in exploring and recovery.

[Got Your Six](#) is an entertainment industry-led hybrid campaign to raise awareness and create a network of support for military, veterans, and their families to become vital members of any community they inhabit. A military term meaning “I’ve got your back,” Got Your Six does just that by educating civilians about an unfamiliar military culture and providing employment and education resources for veterans, service members, and their families. The campaign is split into two phases: awareness and activation. The awareness phase uses celebrity endorsements and multimedia platforms such as television, radio, and social media to capture the attention of the American public, paving the way for community members to remain engaged to the activation phase.

Following the campaign’s six pillars of re-integration—jobs, health, education, housing, family, and leadership—the activation campaign partners one pillar with one group or organization to outline practical goals and timelines for creating action items for the community and members of the military. With military families constantly on the move, it is often difficult for service members and their spouses to find consistent employment. The Got Your Six jobs pillar, for example, partners with the Hiring our Heroes program, a U.S. Department of Commerce initiative to ensure employment for service members and their spouses. These outreach efforts will allow service members and their families to take control of the reintegration process and give them the capabilities to contribute and thrive in the civilian community.

## CONCLUSION

Organizations and professional artists build on the traditions of creative expression with the knowledge that some of the most effective forms of outreach, healing, and community building come through art. As the effects of military conflict alter the civilian world, arts leaders and practitioners continue to make strides in bridging gaps between communities and cultures. With projects whose roots are based in the words, art, and ideas of service members, veterans, and their families, the power behind their perspective doesn't go unnoticed; healing begins and artistic voices continue to emerge from once unlikely sources. Raising awareness not only educates and inspires the civilian community, but it also helps to destigmatize therapy and asking for help for a community that prides itself on strength and self-sufficiency. Just as activists and artists have used artworks to express feelings about war and military engagements, so veterans, service members, and their families might feel sufficiently comfortable and inspired to participate in or create projects.

Though the intention of these programs may differ at the start, the end result is that they create awakened people, stronger families, and, as a result, a more unified and welcoming community. Providing acknowledgement and understanding, resources, and a reinforced community connection are the smartest ways to ensure that when we talk about the military conflicts of this era, creative, poignant, and lasting images and sounds come to mind.



**Maranatha Bivens** is a writer and editor living in Washington, DC. A former military kid, she has lived on numerous posts up and down the eastern seaboard and in Europe. She currently works in the Family Programs Directorate at the Association of the United States Army. Maranatha received her B.A. in English from Florida State University and holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Houston, where she was a senior reader at *Gulf Coast* and held an Inprint Fellowship. She is currently seeking publication for her novel, *Night Jump*, which follows an Army family stationed in the South during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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