



**“Warriors, Tattoos,
and the
Stories They Tell”**

**“Warriors, Tattoos,
and the
Stories They Tell”**



The most powerful visuals are those that tell a story and make us see, particularly that which may be hiding in plain sight. *Warriors, Tattoos, and the Stories They Tell*, seeks to inspire curiosity and encourage dialog between Veterans and civilians. It offers an extraordinary collection of vivid photographs of 10 Veterans who generously agreed to share their tattoos and stories. Their tattoos and personal narratives, ranging from memorial tributes to indelible reminders of traumatic events capture attention, arouse curiosity and broaden our understanding of a world that few have direct knowledge of and many fail to understand. The images and accounts in *Warriors Tattoos and the Stories They Tell* not only reflect the memories and emotions of the 10 featured Veterans but also evoke the complexity and enduring impact of military service. Our contributors served in Vietnam, Iraq and, Afghanistan. Some were involved in peacekeeping missions and operations in Kosovo, Bosnia and, Cuba, and recovery efforts at the Pentagon after the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001. Much of the body art portrayed reveals honor of service and sacred remembrance, as well as the isolation and alienation experienced by so many returning Veterans who struggle to fit in, convinced they cannot relate to those they often view as clueless to the realities of military service.

Warriors, Tattoos, and the Stories They Tell aims to bridge the gap that many Veterans encounter as they attempt to reintegrate after deployment. Few people understand what they went through, but the shared medium of tattoos, now an accepted part of mainstream culture, may provide a safe passage to begin a genuine dialog and exchange of questions, ideas and, beliefs. Ideally, it will serve as a starting point. Members of the military across generations and wars have used tattoos as a form of self-expression and a mark of respect for the fallen. Tattooing as a trend began with the military, which is thought to have introduced the art to the U.S. in the early 1900s. It is the distinctly visual display of personal narrative that is the inspiration for this project, which aims to present an authentic portrayal of a unique and powerful feature of veteran culture in the 21st century. Our hope is that this Veteran inspired project may create a space for civilians to engage in honest exploration and informed conversation. For Veterans, we also seek to demonstrate the value of telling their story and the function it may serve.

We are extremely grateful for the support for this project provided by a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Capital Health Care Network Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC), Small Grants Program for Recovery-Fostering Education and Clinical Innovations. To learn more about the Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Capitol Health Care Network Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center visit <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/index.asp>





Ralph Clark

Sgt. Ralph Clark served in the U.S. Marine Corps from August 1995 until his medical discharge in 2006. He bears a stunningly intricate and colorful sleeve of tattoos that offer a graphic account of his military experience and six combat deployments, spanning two wars and over a decade of service, "It's a picture of my pain and sadness along with little bits of joy and personal loss." Clark is well acquainted with both.

He sustained multiple physical injuries and lost several of his closest friends when the Humvee in which they were traveling was hit by an explosive device. To honor and forever remember those lost he has inked the day and year of the incident on his arm, as well as the exact grid coordinate of the explosion at the base of his wrist. Of his ongoing recovery effort Clark says, "There are good days and bad days" adding, "I live for those that were lost."

Clark fought desperately to regain his physical strength so that he could return to active duty but the medical hurdles proved insurmountable. At the time he said he felt he had lost everything, falling, as he put it, "from hero to zero."

Thankfully, after years battling Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and an addiction to pain medication he entered treatment and embraced a wide range of therapeutic interventions including intensive inpatient and outpatient programs through several Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers. Clark now describes his life as "wonderful and peaceful" and expresses profound gratitude for the love and support of his parents, wife, and friends.







92156375





Jeremy Hahn

For Marine Corps Veteran Jeremy Hahn, his choice of tattoos is meant to reflect the central pillars of his identity: God, Family and, Marine. "These are all that I love and respect and what make me who I am."

Illustrative images of all three mainstays are etched across his right forearm. The meaning of Hahn's most prominent tattoo, a battlefield cross, is unmistakable to Veterans and civilians alike. A rifle stuck into a soldier's boots, with helmet on top, and dog tags hovering nearby. In the field, this iconic image serves as an immediate symbol of loss and mourning and a means of showing honor and respect for the fallen.

Hahn opted for a tattoo of both the battlefield cross as well as the Christian cross. Of the former, he said, "It is for my friends and for the hero's I didn't know and that didn't make it home. They so humbly gave their lives for all of us to be free. I am very thankful for their service."

He added that his tattoo of the Christian cross provides strength and an ever present reminder of God's presence in his life. Currently fighting his own battle with cancer Hahn offered this: "When I am having a really bad day I can look at them to give me strength to keep fighting."

Also on his forearm, Hahn has inked the names of each of his children and a Harley Davidson symbol as reminders of all that is "good for my spirt." Hahn also has several military tattoos meant to convey the enduring pride he feels in being a Marine.







Douglas MacArthur

Armey Staff Sgt. Douglas MacArthur's military career spanned eight years including several deployments and a wide-range of law enforcement and first responder duties. In 1998 he deployed to Bosnia as a Quick Reactionary Force military police officer.

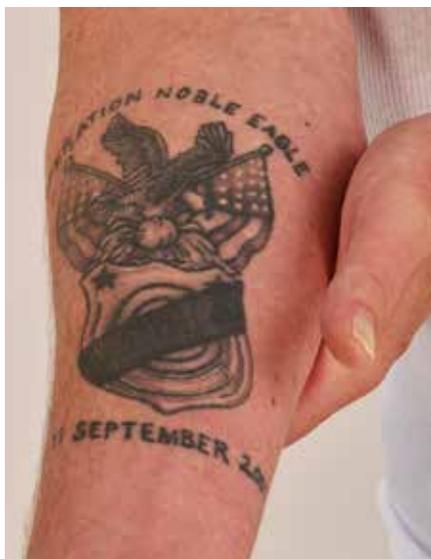
Following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, MacArthur was deployed to the Pentagon in support of Operation Noble Eagle where he served as a first responder in recovery operations.

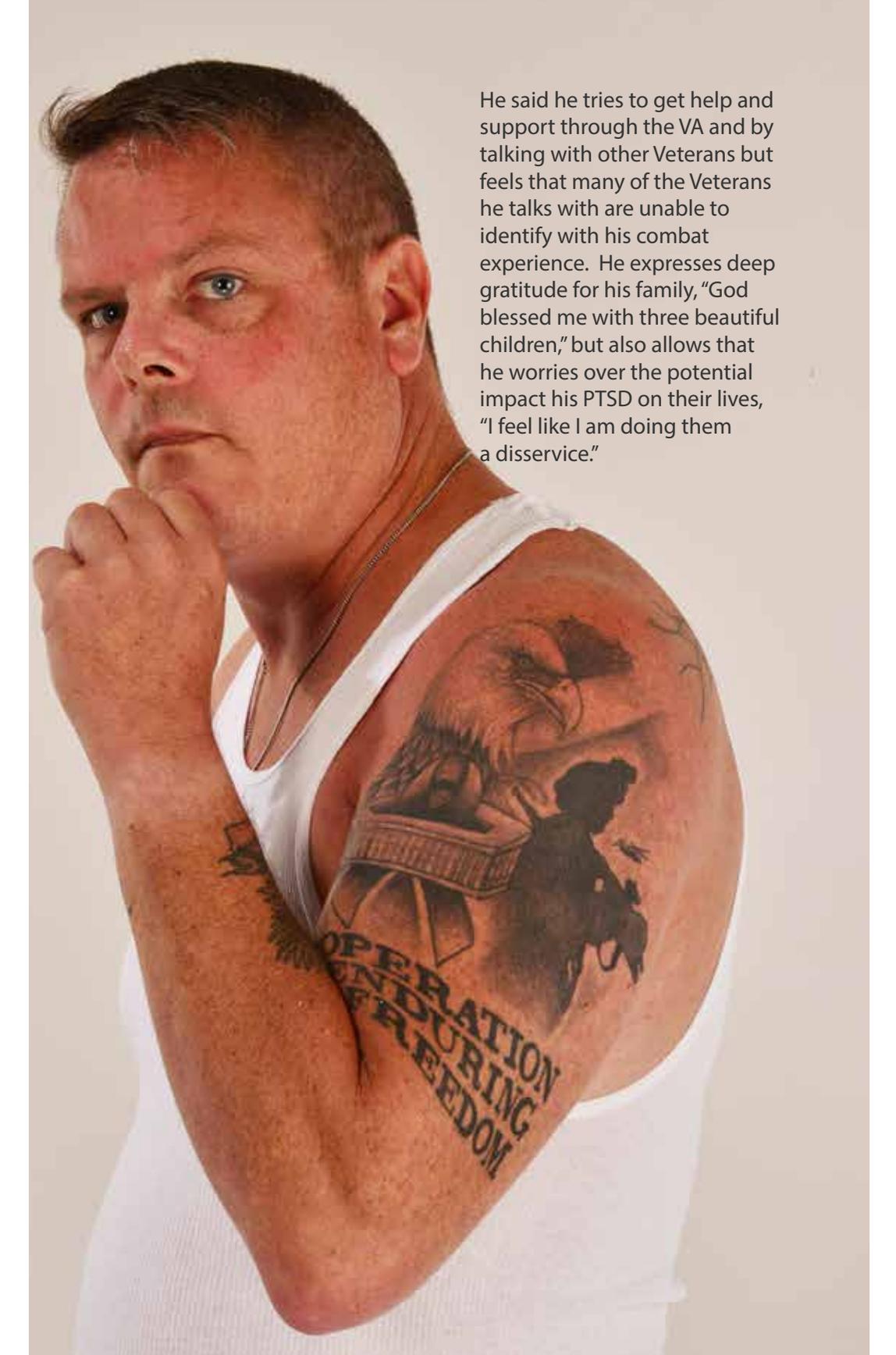
Fifteen years later, recalling the intensity, and the emotional and physical strain of his two weeks at the Pentagon, MacArthur says, "I still can't get the fuel smell out of my head."

In 2003, he deployed to Afghanistan and Cuba where he was assigned to the Department of Defense, Criminal Investigation Task Force. MacArthur bears several tattoos across his chest and arms but it is

the ink that shrouds his entire left shoulder, "my first military tattoo" that holds the most meaning. A vigilant eagle gazes down upon an image of the Pentagon, a combat soldier flanking the building's side, with a Huey helicopter in the distant sky. Beneath this haunting rendering, the designation "Operation Enduring Freedom" is inscribed in bold uppercase lettering.

On his right arm MacArthur bears a CID badge draped by a morning band, a time-honored gesture of law enforcement to publicly mourn the death of a fellow officer. Inscribed above the badge, "Operation Nobel Eagle," and beneath, "Sept. 11, 2001." "Of his ongoing recovery, MacArthur describes his life as a daily struggle to find motivation, adding "The constant survivor's guilt is just one example of how PTSD is living inside of me."



A man with short brown hair and blue eyes is shown from the chest up, wearing a white tank top. He has a large, detailed tattoo on his right shoulder and upper arm. The tattoo depicts a soldier in silhouette, kneeling and holding a child. Below the scene, the words "OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM" are written in a bold, sans-serif font. The man's hand is resting on his chin, and he has a thoughtful expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

He said he tries to get help and support through the VA and by talking with other Veterans but feels that many of the Veterans he talks with are unable to identify with his combat experience. He expresses deep gratitude for his family, "God blessed me with three beautiful children," but also allows that he worries over the potential impact his PTSD on their lives, "I feel like I am doing them a disservice."



Anthony Clavijo

U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Sgt. Anthony Clavijo served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, rotations I and II. In 2005 he deployed to Al-Waleed, an early makeshift refugee camp in Western Iraq near the Syrian border. He also served with the 2nd Marines, as part of the military's relief effort in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Clavijo's tattoos, and the deeply personal meaning each holds, evolved over several years, mirroring his journey, his struggle and, the personal battles he has and continues to face.

As a young Marine, he drew inspiration from his "moto- tat," of the Eagle, Globe and, Anchor, the esteemed emblem of the U.S. Marine Corps: The Eagle proudly carries a streamer in its beak that bears the motto of the Corps: Semper Fidelis. The Globe signifies the worldwide presence of the Corps, and the

anchor is said to reflect the close ties between the Marine Corps and the U.S. Navy.

On his right forearm Clavijo bares a more personal tattoo, one depicting an image of a human eye inscribed with the moral utterance, "Do What Thou Wilt," revealing his own moral dilemma across distinct periods of his service during which he often felt he had no choice. The implication of the tattoo also suggests the inherent conflict of his conviction, "I always had a choice, as well as a responsibility."

By way of contrast, on the inside of his upper arm a decidedly playful image of a giant panda emerges alluding to Clavijo's evolving understanding of himself, "It's my spirit animal," evoking notions of gentility and power while at the same time actively seeking solitude. He said this tattoo was inspired by the work of a well-known but elusive New York City street artist with whom he identifies.

Of his ongoing recovery effort, Clavijo says he finds support among his family, especially his two daughters, his fellow Veterans, and through the numerous PTSD treatment programs he has and continues to participate in through the VA.



His partner added this: "Each day brings unique challenges of living life as a Veteran in a civilian world that does not recognize nor accept the ongoing struggles of our men and women who return from combat. The tattoos serve as story and a visual reminder of this Marine's journey through life thus far."





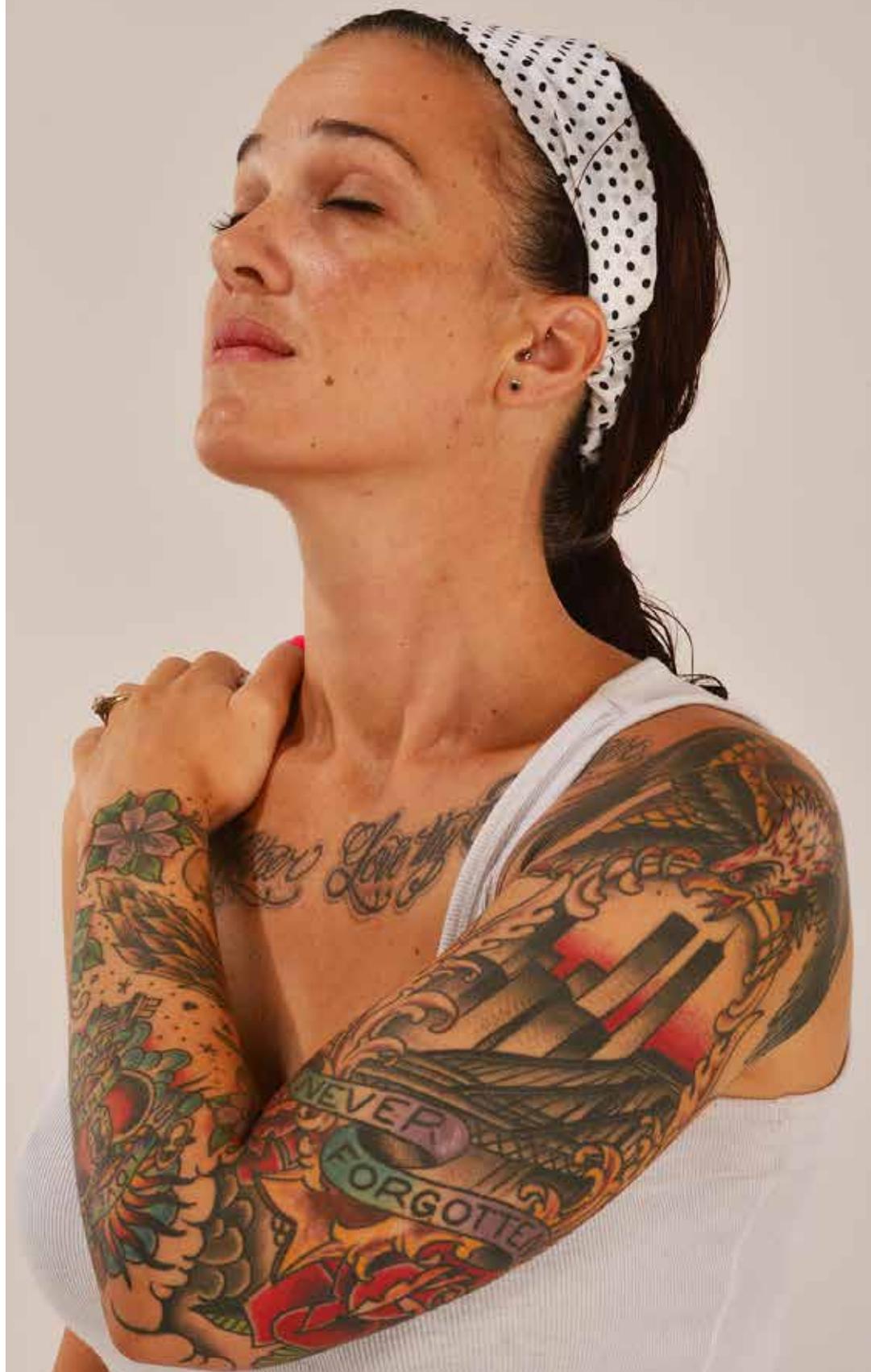
Krystal Marie DiSanto

Sgt. First Class, Krystal Marie DiSanto enlisted in the US Army in 2005, soon after graduating High School. Her ten year military career ended with her medical retirement in 2015. She deployed to Iraq June 2009 - July 2010, supporting the 25th Infantry Division, 3rd Infantry Division, with the 21st Air Cavalry Combat Aviation Brigade, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. As an Intelligence Analyst she was responsible for counter IED analysis.

DiSanto's left arm is adorned with a vibrantly colored full sleeve of tattoos all of which hold profound meaning but the two she identifies as expressing the greatest import glow with brilliant imagery and ink of dazzling hue. Draping her upper arm is a tattoo of the twin towers against a blood red sky, hugged by an eagle, and a banner above proclaiming, "Never Forgotten."

Of her motivation and the significance of her tattoos, Disanto shared this: "Many have patriotic tattoos on their bodies and all have different meanings. This particular tattoo signifies that those who have fallen will never be forgotten, and that the eagle will protect this nation and those who had fallen for the freedom of this nation." On the inside of her arm is an equally vibrant design of an hour glass, signifying night and day, and wreathed with a banner stating "Serenity." Inspired by the well-known Serenity Creed Disanto's passion for this tattoo is personal and bears witness to her trauma.





Reflecting on her wartime experience, she recalled, " I saw things that I could not change, made decisions that I could not change, sacrifices that I could not change, guilt in the decisions that I made that ultimately resulted in death at time, and always said to myself "it is like night and day over here, heaven and hell."

Not unlike many of her fellow soldiers, she found comfort and gained courage from the Serenity Creed, adding, " This one prayer got me through the roughest times in my life, and I will never forget the sacrifices that fellow soldiers made to protect this nation, nor will I forget the part that I played, despite the wounds that are with me to the this day." Of her recovery, Disanto speaks of the lasting presence and daily hurdles of PTSD but also stresses "hope is always an option."

Her wish for other Veterans is that they, like her, find comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles and that there are those who care and who are willing to listen.





Christopher Golembe

Chris Golembe is a seven year infantry and special forces Veteran. He joined the Army in 2005 and deployed to Iraq 2007-2008, during Operation Iraqi Freedom with 2nd battalion, 16th infantry regiment, 1st infantry division. He then went to 1st battalion, 325th airborne infantry regiment, 82nd airborne division.

While in the 82nd he graduated ranger school and later attended Special Forces and Assessment and Selection. He was selected to continue to the qualifications course and upon graduation qualified as a Special Forces Weapons Sergeant.

Of his military career Golembe said, "Im as proud of my infantry roots as I am my time in special forces. The infantry might not be elite but that's where I grew up." His motivation and choice of tattoos is remembrance of friends lost during his deployment.

Though his upper body is etched in ink one image occupies a permanent space in heart as well as his arm. A massive pair of praying hands adorns Golembe's left shoulder. Clutched between the fingers of the hands are several dog tags revealing the names of several lost friends, fellow soldiers, and his Platoon Sergeant. Above the hands, inscribed in elaborate script, "Rest in Peace," and below a tender and humble declaration, "We Miss You." pays tribute to the fallen.

Of his PTSD, TBI and, ongoing recovery journey, Golembe said for years he failed to recognize or deal with his combat trauma, opting instead to ease his insomnia, quiet his mind, and wash away painful memories with alcohol, stating, "I got in trouble and command decided to Med Board me. I got in more trouble and was Chaptered out."





Overtime, he said he came to realize that he needed help. He then entered several private and VA PTSD and substance use treatment programs.

He is now a junior in the social work program at Shepherd University. He also devotes his free time providing kayak instruction to other Veterans.





William Jones

Bill Jones waited 40 years to get his tattoos. He returned home from Vietnam in 1970 with deep feelings of alienation, isolation and, anger. Having served a 12-month tour in Vietnam with the elite 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army, Jones recalled, "I wanted nothing to do with the military or the VA for 40 years. I didn't want to be known as a Veteran or associated with the military."

So he grew his hair long and waged a solitary battle with symptoms of PTSD including hypervigilance, avoidance, isolation, and anger. Thankfully, his burden began to ease three years ago when Jones attended a PTSD peer support group at the Martinsburg, VAMC Hope Center. Since that time, his thoughts about his military service and his view of himself shifted dramatically, now asserting "I'm proud of my service."

"Many Veterans choose to wear ball caps emblazoned with military emblems or seals. Not a fan of hats, Jones opted instead for a tattoo. Wanting to express his pride in service Jones chose to get a unique rendering of the 101st Airborne Division's "Screaming Eagle" insignia. Rather than the official profile of an open beaked eagle Jones' decided on a full face unyielding image, what he referred to as, "an angry eagle, like my PTSD."

On his left arm, Jones displays a freshly inked tattoo. This stark image of Christ on the cross is a memorial tribute, inscribed atop, "For those that gave their all," and at Christ's feet, "23rd Psalm."







Across his right hand, just below the knuckles Luke displays alternating “Runes,” drawn from the ancient Scandinavian alphabet, symbolic representations of death and rebirth, I have had a hand in both.” Luke also bears a small “meat tag,” ID tattooed on the side of his abdomen that carries his personal identification number and blood type, a common practice among recent Veterans acquired to help in identification in the event of a war casualty.

Thirty-one year-old Luke’s body art tells a rich and layered story of personal loss, perseverance and, the triumph of the human spirit. He entered the U.S. Army in 2006, at the age of 21, and deployed to Iraq 2008-2009 where he operated as a specialist assigned to infantry convoys, patrols and, raids.

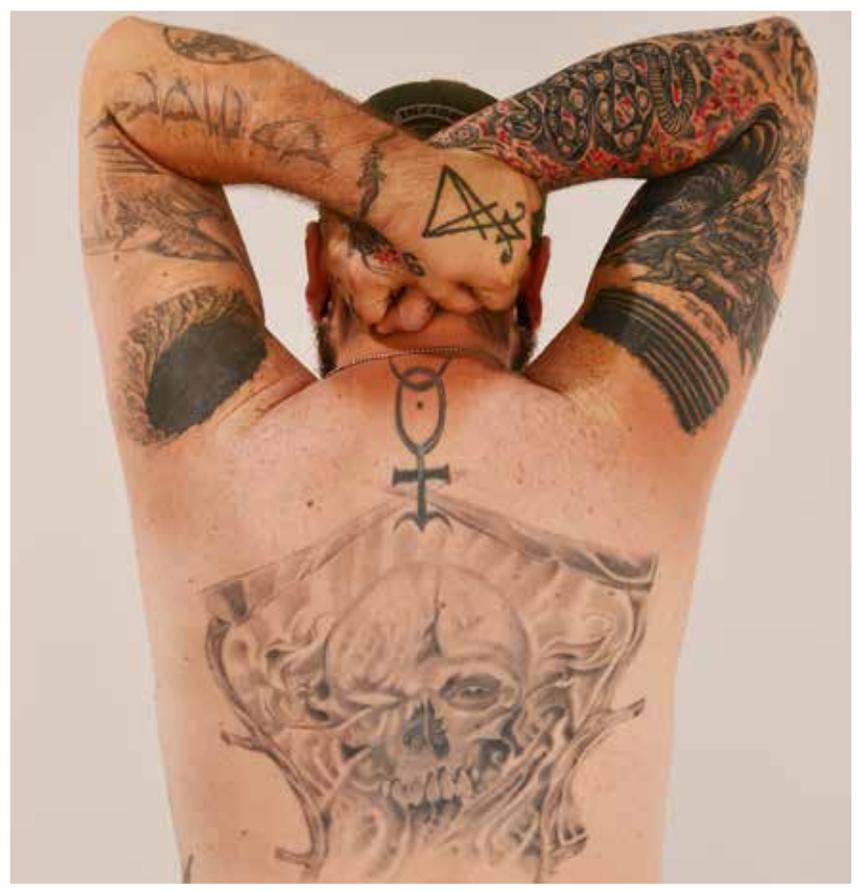
At first glance, his tattoos are a study of paradoxes- the supremacy of strength and the vulnerability of injury- symbols of death, life and, rebirth. A haunting image of a raven with its dramatic black plumage ascends his arm scanning skyward while impaled by an arrow.

The Raven features prominently in Scandinavian culture, Luke’s family heritage. In Norse mythology it can be seen as an omen of death and is also perceived as a source of power. For Luke, it serves as a metaphor for his combat experience, “It’s me. The animal feels pain but keeps going. I’m not dead.”



Reflecting on his and other Veteran’s ongoing recovery efforts, Luke shared this: “Every one of us, every single one, earned the title Soldier, Marine, Sailor, and Airman. Just because our “term” is up, does not mean our oath is. To give up is not an option. Keep the faith brothers and sisters.”







David Cotton

David Cotton served as a U.S. Army Combat Engineer and Airborne Paratrooper from August 1999 to February 2005. His military service included a 2001 deployment to Kosovo in support of a peacekeeping mission, dubbed, Operation Joint Guardian. He also served in Operation Enduring Freedom during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Cotton's skin reveals a virtual menagerie of mostly monochromatic images, some clearly representing pride of service such as the Airborne wings on his arm and the "37th Engineer Battalion" unit patch on his left shoulder. Other inked illustrations appear as abstractions from reality, at once darkly disturbing, powerfully fascinating, and compelling inquiry. Sheathed in ink, Cotton's body-art is conspicuous by design.

Giving voice to the difficulties he faced reintegrating into civilian life, he said, "People treated me like an outcast so I wanted to look like one." Emblazoned across his chest is a haunting skeletal image of a human skull held aloft by massive wings spreading upward to his shoulders. Atop the skull rests a Maroon Beret, an international symbol of elite airborne forces, adorned with Cotton's unit crest.





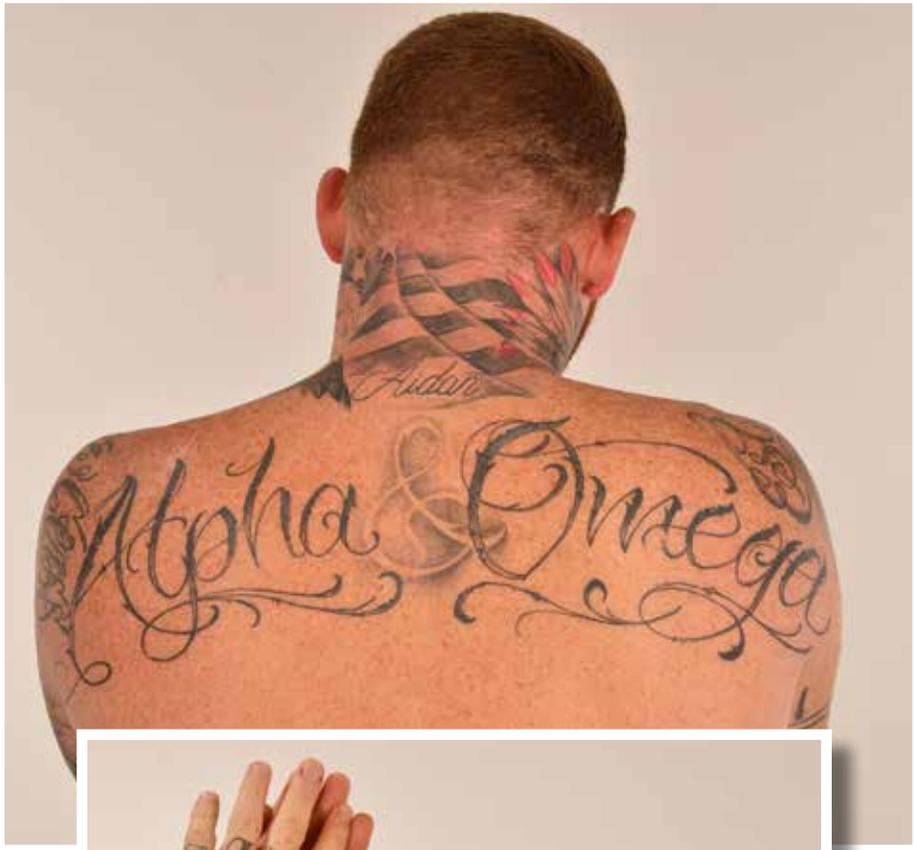
Two distinct designs clutch each side of his neckline. An elaborate Native American headdress accented in red ink and worn by a ghostly form spreads from his esophagus to his earlobes. Of this tattoo, Cotton alludes to a deep affinity with the graphic image, "I feel like a dead warrior." By way of contrast, on the opposite side a majestic eagle is portrayed with the American flag representing his country and his service.

About his recovery, Cotton credits the relationship he formed with his tattoo artist, evolving over more than three years, as playing a decisive role. Having visualized each of his tattoos for many years he couldn't afford the considerable costs. That is, until he met his tattoo artist. The two formed a close alliance and their three year collaboration including Cotton's narration of his experiences and his trauma, proved to have healing potential for both men.

For Cotton, "It was like therapy," and for the tattoo artist, he gained an understanding of the warrior's experience, one which helped him better understand his now deceased father, a combat Veteran of the Vietnam War.









Daniel Jones

68-year old Army Veteran, Daniel Jones' striking array of tattoos serves as an indelible reminder of the momentous events of his military combat service in Vietnam. He served with Battery B, of the 4th Battalion, 42nd Artillery, a towed 105mm howitzer battalion assigned to the 4th Infantry Division.

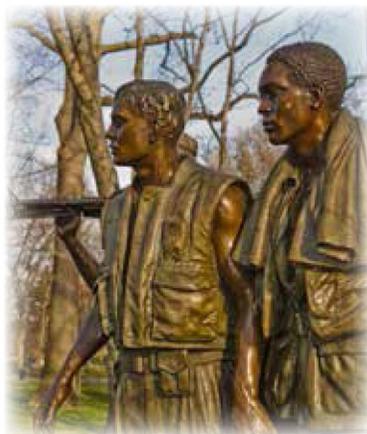
Just three weeks shy of his 20th birthday, Jones and his battalion arrived at the Pleiku Province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Recalling the shock and terror of his first impressions, Jones said, "It was a crash course in combat."

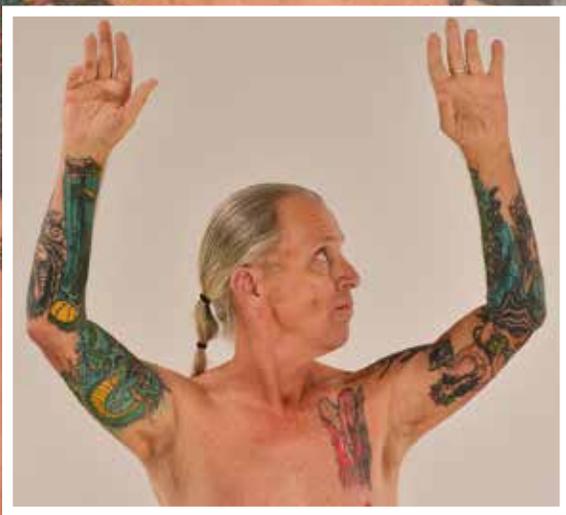
Like many Vietnam Veterans when Jones returned home he had no interest in calling attention to his combat service, nor did he feel that anyone cared to listen. So he endured his pain in silence and for 25 years attempted to bury his

memories in drugs and alcohol until he had what he called, "a moment of clarity," after which he got sober.

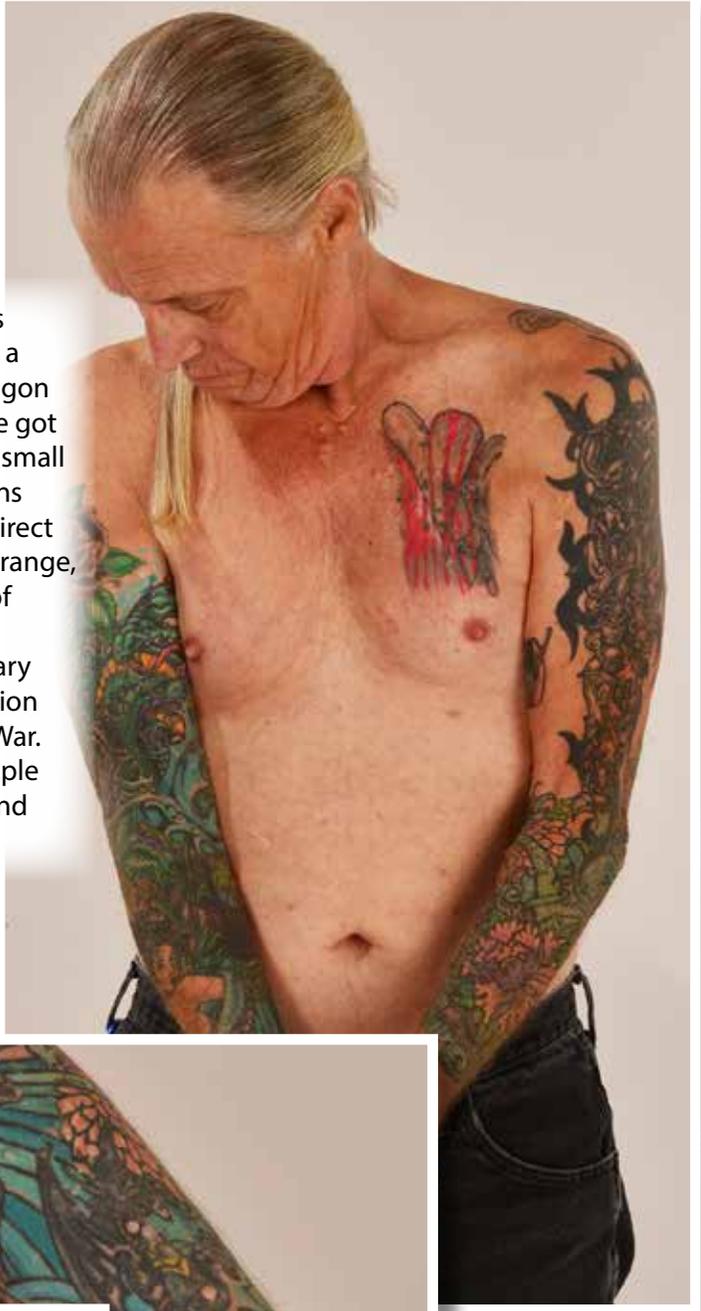
It would be nearly 20 years, however, before he came to understand and to receive help through the VA for his PTSD. Thankfully, he found people willing to listen and began a recovery journey that continues to this day.

Jones also found healing potential in tattoos. Nearly 25 years after coming home, he discovered by using his skin as a canvass he was able to begin to express the stories and unlock the impact of his trauma and its aftermath. Vivid colorful fragments of visual images and intricate designs of Asian influence extend from the top of each shoulder draping down his back. Of these he said, "some of it looks like rockets," and though he was not initially aware of the parallels, a common theme gradually emerged, and he now says it accurately conveys the intensity of his experience and mirrors the imprint of his trauma.





Wrapping around his forearm, Jones bears a vibrantly colored dragon tattoo that he said he got to conceal a band of small lumps and skin lesions he attributes to his direct exposure to Agent Orange, a powerful mixture of chemical herbicides sprayed by U.S. military on trees and vegetation during the Vietnam War. "I just got sick of people asking me about it and decided to cover it."



Acknowledgments

This project was funded by a grant from the Department of Veteran Affairs, Capital Health Care Network (VISN 5) Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC), Small Grants Program for Recovery-Fostering Education and Clinical Innovations

Contributors for this project were drawn from Veterans currently enrolled in health care through the Martinsburg, VA Medical Center (VAMC).

Interviews were conducted by Dr. Jacqueline Cleland, staff psychologist, Martinsburg VAMC. Graphic design, photography, and production services were provided by the Education and Learning Resources Service. All photos and information contained in this document have been reviewed and authorized by each of the participating Veterans. Written permission was granted through informed consent as documented on VA forms VHA-10-3023 and VHA-10-5345. The information included in this book is not, nor is it intended to be, medical, psychiatric, psychological or legal advice.

To learn more about the Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Capitol Health Care Network Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center visit <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/index.asp>

We welcome your feedback. Send comments, thoughts, impressions, and inquiries to:

Jacqueline Cleland, Psy.D at: jacqueline.cleland@va.gov



Martinsburg VA Medical Center
510 Butler Avenue • Martinsburg, WV 25405
304-263-0811 • 800-817-3807
www.martinsburg.va.gov

