

**THIS IS NOT  
A MILITARY  
UNIFORM**

An Essay About  
Combat Paper  
By Kevin Basl

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*Combat Paper is handmade paper crafted from pulped military uniforms.*

A veteran tells me he's got technology that can open up a whole new dimension with Combat Paper. He can bring the paper to life. Make it responsive to heartbeats, light, audio, breath. Using circuitry, he can hook it to a motor, make it undulate, flap, shiver. *Really?*

Another tells me she's got paper pulp in deep freeze. It's her husband's cut up and beaten uniform, erstwhile worn at atom bomb test sites in Nevada. She'll exhume it on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. She'll ceremoniously cover her soulmate's military decorations with the pulp, use the sun for line-drying this special paper. Ghost images of the rusty medals will bleed through the fibers, rise to the surface.

Eli Wright, army medic turned up-all-night artist, he needs a coffin. He's making a full-body casting in Combat Paper. Obviously, this requires a storage vessel. Under moonlight, he and I sneak out to bounce on his neighbor's trampoline (late night exercise) and notice a busted fence in the weeds. Perfect. We gather up the slats and break out his circular saw. Later, when his landlady asks him to cover his project when the furnace guy comes, he's mostly not offended.

Suddenly, the implausible seems plausible. Electricity crackles through the paper studio. Veterans in rubber aprons and wader boots gesticulate passionately, discussing art, love, war, the aesthetic particulars of paper with a deckled edge. There's spray-painting, scissor-snipping and loud music to mask the humming-grind of the Oracle beater, turning rags to pulp.

One thing that continually surprises me is what the concept and process of Combat Paper conjures up in people. Often rapid-fire, stories and ideas start coming. People get sparkly-eyed. They talk about things they've shared with no one. So much guilt. So much conviction. For a few hours, Johnny is filled with the inspiration of Michelangelo. He opens up. Now he wants to go out and teach others how to transform their uniforms into paper too. Perhaps it's not a stretch to say people get *enraptured* with this stuff.

It's all very strange. This unlikely substrate, usually gray and coarse (gray because that's the color produced by uniforms

printed with the modern digital camo pattern). It's not especially good for drawing or silkscreen or origami. And, well...it's *paper*.

So what excites us?

As a spectator, I viewed papermaking from military uniforms as a simple act of protest and defiance. "Combat Paper" and "Warrior Writers" kept popping up online when I researched Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), trying to determine whether to join this group of outspoken and plucky antiwar agitators (I did). As artists and activists, the key organizers of all three groups apparently moved in the same circles, collaborated. Later, in 2012, I met Warrior Writers' director Lovella Calica. On our second encounter, she excitedly handed me Chantelle Bateman's *Ssgt. Recruitme*, a Combat Paper broadside featuring Chantelle's poem of the same title. The paper was sinewy, her remorseful words about her marine recruiter scrawled in charcoal. It struck me as a profound balance of form and content. I knew I had to turn my army uniforms into art too. Lovella told me about a Combat Paper workshop at the Printmaking Center of New Jersey. There, the following month, Jan Barry, one of the founders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (IVAW's big brother), taught me how to form sheets with his patient hands. I went home and tore up two uniforms, to get a jump on the next workshop.

I was red hot after I came home from Iraq, in 2008. I had participated in an unnecessary, immoral, costly war! I had

been a stooge for defense contractors! A pawn, a puppet, a cog: I would have described my military experience using every bitter metaphor in the book, if I had had an outlet for saying it. And I did have a lot to say, but I just didn't know where to start. Finally, through art and activism, a door opened, revealing a way to incorporate memories of war and military malfeasance into a presence of peace.

Following my first year or two of busily macerating uniforms and yelling in the streets, I found a healthy art-activism-life balance, thankfully before burning out. Papermaking, on top of writing and music, helped me accept the contradictions I live with. I now embrace my "war-veteran-turned-peace-activist" status, which some veterans may consider traitorous and hypocritical (they'll come around). I do not regret my time in the army; however, I remain ashamed of my involvement in the Iraq War. Thankfully, art provides a place for contradictions to coexist, a home for so many of us.

Combat Paper workshops are veritable incubators for stories and ideas precisely because they allow contradictions to emerge and co-exist. For example, Sally can have her dissent and defiance while Bob, a Vietnam veteran, takes his jungle fatigues apart one stitch at a time, saying he's doing it to heal, saying the VA's meds no longer cut it. Sally can talk with Bob, regardless of who each voted for. They can have a civil conversation sans the impulse for one to pop the other's head off. They're focused

on the deconstructing and the reconstructing. They're discovering common ground. They're learning to be makers, not destroyers.

For these reasons, Combat Paper has touched many, veterans and non-veterans alike. It's certainly affected me deeply, carried me off to unexpected places. In fact, two projects very close to my heart likely wouldn't have happened without this very special paper.

First, it helped me muster the nerve to ask Grandpa, blue collar stoic of the Silent Generation, for an interview. On a frigid December afternoon in 2014, at my grandparents' Pennsylvania farmhouse, he told me about fighting in the Korean War. He talked about receiving his army draft notification, carpooling with friends to basic training, and meeting kids from all over the U.S. on an exciting, but nauseating, ship-ride across the Pacific. He described the way a mortar whistles when it flies too close. He talked about Private French, shell-shocked in the "swamp bunker." He talked about encountering a field of Chinese soldiers lying frozen and snow-covered in horrid, contorted poses. He turned attention to his injured leg, The Limp, the proverbial elephant at so many family reunions (he couldn't remember the shrapnel hitting him, only coming-to on the battlefield while four medics were rushing him away). This was a disturbing conversation—harrowing image upon harrowing image. When he finished, I asked if he

had any uniforms up in the attic (*Yes, of course*). I asked if I could “borrow” one for papermaking (*Sure, why not*). 100% cotton. It produced fine tan-colored, smooth sheets. On them, I silk-screened a handsome photo of Grandpa lying in a field at basic training, at Fort Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania. “Well, how about that,” he said, when I handed him the print. “I looked good in 1952.” When Grandpa died just a month later, I displayed his paper on an easel beside his casket, shared bits of his story with anyone at the funeral who would listen.

Second, in 2013, I unearthed music recordings I had begun years earlier in Iraq. Writing angry songs helped me kill the tedium of my nightly radar watch, absurdly scanning a digital sky for an enemy with no air force (some may call my music-making “dereliction of duty,” I call it “a better use of my time”). I dusted off my guitar after a long hiatus, finished the music, made album sleeves with a uniform I wore on that tour, passed them out. Now I’m a rock star (says Mom).

I’ve learned that papermaking is rarely an end in itself. It’s a conduit. It encourages sharing, medium-mixing, and collaboration. It sparks conversations and experimentation, helps us realize how the events of our lives are like one big constellation, interconnected. Paper is ubiquitous, yet hand papermaking, as a craft, is underappreciated. Regardless, papermakers are a generous tribe. They trade recipes, techniques, resources. They teach the process to anyone willing

to learn. No exception to that tradition, perhaps Combat Paper’s single most important artistic contribution, beyond any individual piece of art, has been teaching so many people the craft.

More creating, less destroying. More sharing, less hoarding. Combine all these ingredients—the social and political elements, the versatility of the medium—and one begins to understand the magic of Combat Paper.

Listen. If humans are to have a life here on planet earth, we need more activities like this. We need creative practices to help us push through hardships and loss. We need more people getting their hands dirty (or, in our case, pulpy). We need empathy. We need better communication, too, because logic no longer seems to apply in our culture, especially among those with the loudest voices and the most airtime.

Drew Cameron, one of the founders of Combat Paper, pulped his first uniform in Burlington, Vermont, in 2007. He calls Combat Paper a “new language.” This is a concept worth unpacking (forgive me, I’m a philosophy and literature geek). Is Drew proposing that papermaking could be a solution to the current crisis in the creation of truth and meaning? Papermaking as a post-linguistic information exchange? A mindfulness practice to initiate a thunderous, collective *Ohmmmmmmmm*? Or maybe it’s about radically rethinking the meaning of one common object (in our case, the politically and

emotionally-charged military uniform) and using that new meaning as a sort of linguistic beacon—a semantic reference point—from which we might begin radically changing the meaning of other words, objects and ideas?

*Say what?*

There's a passage in Paul Auster's metaphysical detective novel *City of Glass* that I find instructive. The fictional protagonist, who in clever postmodern fashion has assumed his author's own name, "Paul Auster," becomes a private investigator tracking an eccentric man named Stillman. When Auster finally catches up with Stillman, he asks him just what the hell he's been doing, inspecting and collecting all these random broken objects lying around New York City. Stillman says he's crafting a new language:

A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality. Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent. It's made a mess of everything.

A mess indeed: ecological devastation, forever wars, fractured communities, the rising sea. Stillman goes on: "But words, as you yourself understand, are capable of change. The problem is how to demonstrate this."

How to demonstrate this? Could Combat Paper be the tool Stillman seeks? I wish I could step into the pages of that novel and take him to a papermaking workshop. The ensuing conversations and interactions might help us better understand the new language concept both Drew and Stillman speak of.

Or perhaps each papermaker must arrive at his or her own understanding of this abstract concept. One book I've found enlightening for my own purposes is *A Pattern Language*, that back-to-the-land classic that's inspired a thousand homesteads. It's essentially a design manual for constructing well-functioning societies, from regional-level culture, to houses, to gardens, to the personal objects we keep. The "words" of the language are patterns of lived experience: children at play, getting good sleep, dinner with friends, crafting, reading a book beside a sunny window. From the dust jacket:

[...] in designing their environments people always rely on certain "languages," which, like the languages we speak, allow them to articulate and communicate an infinite variety of designs within a formal system which gives them coherence.

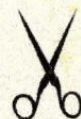
I like to think of the processes, recipes and workshop communities of Combat Paper through the lens of *A Pattern Language*: veterans shed off the old language (the military and its uniform) as they begin creating a new one (a blank sheet of paper, with its endless possibilities), which ideally is then used to transform self and society (what one puts on the paper matters profoundly). Ultimately, to me, the new language of Combat Paper represents a body of words—a poem—within the language of revolution, a new way of being that will serve to transform humanity's broken superstructure.

Wish-thinking, perhaps.

And perhaps now I am taking this essay too far off into theory-ether. To bring us back to earth, I'll emphasize that a person can't learn the language of Combat Paper from reading about it. Like building a home, you must learn by doing. To learn the language of Combat Paper you must come to a workshop and sit with others also learning the language. You must make paper. And you must keep coming back (as with all languages: use it or lose it).

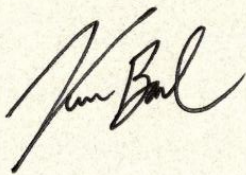
Dear Reader, there's much work to be done out here, on the plane of existence we currently share which, unarguably, is stranger than fiction. Humanity has many ills, and I like to think that Combat Paper is a part of the solution, however small. May its energy ripple out through the fibers of our splintered reality. May it remind us why we need to be present in our daily lives,

make realtime connections with people. May the FBI and CIA remain oblivious to its logic and power. May it forever remain a force for good.



**Kevin Basl** is a writer and musician living near Ithaca, NY. He was in the U.S. Army from 2003 to 2008, twice deploying to Iraq. Since 2013, he has facilitated numerous hand-papermaking workshops with Combat Paper NJ and Frontline Arts. He is a member of About Face (formerly Iraq Veterans Against the War) and Veterans for Peace. For more, visit: [www.kevinbasl.com](http://www.kevinbasl.com).

This handmade, signed and numbered edition was printed and bound at Out of Step Press, Trumansburg, NY, in March 2020, with assistance from Laura Rowley and Nathan Lewis. "This Is not a Military Uniform" was written in celebration of Combat Paper's 10 year anniversary, in 2017. The cover was made from a Vietnam-era U.S. Army uniform and printed on a Vandercook letterpress.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kevin Basl". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kevin" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Basl".

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