



NATIONAL VETERANS
Art Museum

TRIENNIAL
VETERAN ART SUMMIT

ON WAR & SURVIVAL

Exhibition: May 3, 2019 - July 29, 2019
Summit: May 3, 2019 - May 5, 2019

LITERATURE & EDUCATION
GUIDE

TRIENNIAL EXHIBITIONS & VENUES

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ON WAR & SURVIVAL LITERATURE & EDUCATION GUIDE

With a focus on the visual, literary, performative and creative practices of veterans, the National Veterans Art Museum Triennial explores a century of war and survival while challenging the perception that war is something only those who have served in the military can comprehend. Throughout history, art has provided a frame to create meaning out of the complicated experience of war, seek justice and imagine reconciliation. The NVAM Triennial draws on this history to connect today's veteran artists with the history of veteran creative practices and their impact on society over the past century. The NVAM Triennial exhibition opening coincides with the Veteran Art Summit, featuring a series of presentations, workshops, panels and discussions on May 3-5, 2019 at the Chicago Cultural Center, National Veterans Art Museum and the DePaul Art Museum.

The document you hold contains the literary and educational components of the Triennial. The literary component features 12 poems written by veterans over the past century, along with corresponding short historical/contextual essays, written by curator Kevin Basl. The education guide, prepared by Edgar Gonzalez-Baeza, includes discussion questions and a glossary specific to the exhibition and the Veteran Art Movement. These materials are meant to augment—perhaps even complicate—the Triennial's visual and performance artworks.

RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH: A CENTURY OF WAR POETRY BY VETERANS

Curated by Kevin Basl

I cite a U.S. Army field exercise for sparking my interest in poetry—an artform most people likely don't associate with the military. It goes like this: In 2004, before my unit left to spend a month at the Army's National Training Center (NTC) in California, Sergeant C, my superior NCO, received a book of love poems as a joke. Preparing for our upcoming deployment to Iraq, we went to NTC (in the Mojave Desert) to practice land navigation, convoying and raid tactics. There was no love about it. About three weeks in, however, Sergeant C remembered the book and pulled it from his ruck. After perusing its pages—and no doubt delusional from exhaustion and the heat—he assigned each member of our six-person team to write a love poem, due tomorrow. Three flat out refused. I, on the other hand, jumped at the challenge (anything was better than rereading *Maxim* magazine). What then emerged in my olive drab notebook was not a love poem. It was cynical, morbid, fragmented, with not a lick of meter (or music either). In my verses, I compared the mushy contents of MRE food to my own organs, from my brain, to my intestines, to my heart. My rifle was an "artificial spine." When I read it to Sergeant C he called me crazy, but commended my efforts. Perhaps it's ironic that the first "poem" I ever wrote—without knowing hardly anything about the literary history in the following pages—came from an army superior's mock-assignment and more than a little field fatigue.

Or perhaps it's not ironic. It seems a lot of poetry may have emerged in a similar way. I like to think I have something in common with the 12 authors included here (of course, I'm not comparing their incredible featured work to what I jotted down some 15 years ago). Written by American authors who served in the military during the war—or era—they write about (some, however, didn't necessarily serve

in the U.S. military), these poems challenge, provoke and serve as a form of witness. They represent literary and social movements of the past century that have shaped American culture. They're a pleasure to read, and it's no wonder why they've inspired other veterans to write their own poems.

Beyond the verses themselves, this educational guide, prepared for National Veterans Art Museum's inaugural Triennial, also includes short essays I've written to help readers see the poems in the Veteran Art Movement's historical context. I also encourage readers to use the discussion questions (intended for reading groups, classrooms and personal reflection) found in the educational section of this guide. War poetry, at its best, starts conversations. This educational guide is intended to do the same.

—Kevin Basl

MAKTOOB

By Alan Seeger

A shell surprised our post one day
And killed a comrade at my side.
My heart was sick to see the way
He suffered as he died.

I dug about the place he fell,
And found, no bigger than my thumb,
A fragment of the splintered shell
In warm aluminum.

I melted it, and made a mould,
And poured it in the opening,
And worked it, when the cast was cold,
Into a shapely ring.

And when my ring was smooth and bright,
Holding it on a rounded stick,
For seal, I bade a Turco write
Maktoob in Arabic.

Maktoob! "'Tis written!"... So they think,
These children of the desert, who
From its immense expanses drink
Some of its grandeur too.

Within the book of Destiny,
Whose leaves are time, whose cover, space,
The day when you shall cease to be,
The hour, the mode, the place,

Are marked, they say; and you shall not
By taking thought or using wit
Alter that certain fate one jot,
Postpone or conjure it.

Learn to drive fear, then, from your heart.
If you must perish, know, O man,
'Tis an inevitable part
Of the predestined plan.

And, seeing that through the ebon door
Once only you may pass, and meet
Of those that have gone through before
The mighty, the elite—

Guard that not bowed nor blanched with fear
You enter, but serene, erect,
As you would wish most to appear
To those you most respect.

So die as though your funeral
Ushered you through the doors that led
Into a stately banquet hall
Where heroes banqueted;

And it shall all depend therein
Whether you come as slave or lord,
If they acclaim you as their kin
Or spurn you from their board.

So, when the order comes: "Attack!"
And the assaulting wave deploys,
And the heart trembles to look back
On life and all its joys;

Or in a ditch that they seem near
To find, and round your shallow trough
Drop the big shells that you can hear
Coming a half mile off;

When, not to hear, some try to talk,
And some to clean their guns, or sing,
And some dig deeper in the chalk—
I look upon my ring:

And nerves relax that were most tense,
And Death comes whistling down unheard,
As I consider all the sense
Held in that mystic word.

And it brings, quieting like balm
My heart whose flutterings have ceased,
The resignation and the calm
And wisdom of the East.

NEXT TO OF COURSE GOD AMERICA I

By E.E. Cummings

"next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country 'tis of centuries come and go
and are no more. what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

WORLD WAR I

(1914 to 1918)

Writing in 1936, German cultural critic Walter Benjamin described World War I: “A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds [...]” A war that leaders initially expected to take only a few months dragged on for four bloody years. In the end, 32 nations had gotten involved and some 18 million people had died. Casting a long shadow over the decades to come, the “Great War” toppled four empires, redefined borders, sparked the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and inspired artistic and social movements across the political spectrum. A fully mechanized war, the promise of the industrial revolution—that machines would make life easier for all—instead kept the battlefields of Western Europe locked in trench warfare. Outmoded, linear fighting tactics met machine guns, tanks, chemical weapons and airplanes. Ideas of chivalry and honor lost meaning as combat became increasingly futile.

In contrast to this brutality, World War I was a literary war. Soldiers read, wrote and discussed poetry on the front lines, the British especially. Poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon regularly sent their verses home to England for publication. While American soldiers didn’t produce near the poetic output of the British (primarily because the U.S. wasn’t in the war as long), a small body of American World War I poetry by veterans exists. Poet **Alan Seeger**, an American expat living in Paris before the war, joined the French Foreign Legion in 1914. Two years later, he would die in the Battle of the Somme. Prophetically, his poems “I Have a Rendezvous with Death” and “Maktoob” (1917) explore themes of predestination and mortality (note his use of Arabic—common in the poems of today’s GWOT veterans). Seeger’s work wouldn’t be published until a year following

his death, after the British war poets had begun eschewing florid language and patriotic naivete. T.S. Eliot, reviewing Seeger’s poems, writes, “The work is well done, and so much out of date as to be almost a positive quality. It is high-flown, heavily decorated and solemn [...]”

Seeger’s poems appeared “out of date” because of trends—rather, major upheavals—happening in the art world at the time. The era leading up to and following World War I, the “modernist” period, is generally characterized by its radical break from cultural traditions. Responding to the devastation of the war, artistic movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism (both major influences on poetry) blamed Western institutions for leading society astray. Capitalism, Christianity, and Enlightenment ideals were under attack. In literature, techniques of fragmentation, “chance operations,” and stream-of-consciousness were employed. Free verse poetry—verses that avoid strict meter and rhyme—would become the prevalent form (and remains so today). An example of such work is “next to of course god america i” (1926) by **E.E. Cummings**, who served as an ambulance driver in the war. Politically, his poems echo those written by the British soldier-poets in the war’s later years. However, his humorous tone, idiosyncratic punctuation and odd syntax set him apart. His poetry remains fresh today.

1. “Maktoob” by Alan Seeger
2. “next to of course god america i” by E.E. Cummings

IFF

By Howard Nemerov

1.

Hate Hitler? No, I spared him hardly a thought.
But Corporal Irmin, first, and later on
The O.C. (Flying), Wing Commander Briggs,
And the station C.O. Group Captain Ormery –
Now there were men were objects fit to hate,
Hitler a moustache and a little curl
In the middle of his forehead, whereas these
Bastards were bastards in your daily life,
With Power in their pleasure, smile or frown.

2.

Not to forget my navigator Bert,
Who shyly explained to me that the Jews
Were ruining England and Hitler might be wrong
But he had the right idea... We were a crew,
And went on so, the one pair left alive
Of a dozen that chose each other flipping coins
At the OTU, but spoke no civil word
Thereafter, beyond the words that had to do
With the drill for going out and getting back.

3.

One night, with a dozen squadrons coming home
To Manston, the tower gave us orbit and height
To wait our turn in their lofty waiting-room,
And on every circuit, when we crossed the Thames,
Our gunners in the estuary below
Loosed off a couple of dozen rounds on spec,
Defending the Commonwealth as detailed to do,
Their lazy lights so slow, then whipping past.
All the above were friends. And then the foe.

THE CROWDED COUNTRIES OF THE BOMB

By George Oppen

What man could do,
And could not
And chance which has spared us
Choice, which has shielded us

As if a god. What is the name of that place
We have entered:
Despair? Ourselves?

That we can destroy ourselves
Now

Walking in the shelter,
The young and the old,
Of each other's backs and shoulders

Entering the country that is
Impenetrably ours.

WORLD WAR II

(1939 to 1945)

The Great War, of course, was not the war to end all wars, as so many had hoped. Nationalism and economic depression—aftereffects of World War I—enabled Hitler and Mussolini’s fascist, imperialist agendas to take hold, in turn forcing Europe into yet another war. In the Asia-Pacific region, Japan, in its own quest for power, attacked multiple countries, including China, India, the Philippines and the United States, opening a second theater of war. In every sense of the definition, World War II was a “total war,” marshaling industrial, economic, natural and human resources on an unprecedented scale. It involved over 60 nations and claimed the lives of some 57 million people, over half of them civilians. In the Holocaust alone, the Nazis systematically murdered millions of Jews, gay men, gypsies, political dissidents, intellectuals and disabled people. Both Axis and Allied air raids bombed large urban populations, also causing a staggering amount of civilian deaths. In the most extreme example, the two nuclear bombs dropped by the U.S. on Japan, together, instantly incinerated well over 100,000 people. “We can destroy ourselves now,” **George Oppen**, World War II U.S. Army veteran and Pulitzer-winning poet, writes in “The Crowded Countries of the Bomb” (1962). To this day, the threat of nuclear war still significantly influences global politics (and human consciousness).

Faced with such immense power and destruction, it’s no wonder that questions of truth and free will, paranoia, racism, and personal and national traumas became major themes in literature by World War II veterans (and many other writers as well). Novels by veterans Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon became some of the most famous works of 20th century American literature, while poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Koch returned from the war and helped start influential poetry movements (Beat poetry and the

New York School, respectively). Like the British World War I soldier-poets, American World War II veterans would also eventually produce a significant body of war poetry, much of which challenges nostalgic, popular representations of the “Good War.” World War II veteran and poet Harvey Shapiro compares the two bodies of work in *Poets of World War II* (2003): “the Americans write in quite a different tone. Their poems are often bawdy, bitchy, irreverent. They do not glory in brotherhood and they do not, as a rule, find nobility in one another.” Beyond the common tensions of close-quartered military life, one must not forget that the ranks were still segregated by law until 1948. Black troops talked of the “Double V”—victory against fascism abroad and racism at home. Anti-Semitism also infected the Allied armies. **Howard Nemerov**, a veteran of the U.S. Army Air Force Royal Canadian Unit, depicts this bigotry in his poem “IFF” (1987) (the acronym “IFF” is radar terminology for “identification: friend or foe”).

Any 20th century American literary history would not be complete without mentioning the G.I. Bill. Passed in 1946, the bill would guarantee a college education, housing, and other benefits to World War II veterans—people who otherwise may not have gotten such opportunities (most of the writers listed above used it). The G.I. Bill, often credited with helping establish a strong American middle class, would not only put thousands of working class veterans on college campuses, it would help jump-start some of the MFA creative writing programs that veterans continue to attend today.

1. Howard Nemerov “IFF”
2. George Oppen “The Crowded Countries of the Bomb”

DECEMBER, 1952

By Keith Wilson

Back to the combat zone.

Ships, exactly stationed, at darkness
their wakes catch white fire, long graceful lines
blue stacksmoke, fading to night

red battle lamps, men walking
ghosts in the chain lockers
old chanties sung in the small watches
of morning

*Nelson, battle signals snapping,
coming about, broadside ready*

*Farragut, headed in...
the shores blazing with light
exploding shells a terror,
the calm voice on the bridge*

*Skeleton crews, prize ships,
returning to Ur of the Chaldees, swords raised
gleaming before the dying sun*

A blue United Nations patch on the arm, a new
dream. One World. One
Nation.

Peace.

The old bangles, dangled
once more, always working,
buying allegiances

stabbing
tracers hit a village,
the screams of women, children
men die

It is when the bodies are counted
man sees the cost of lies, tricks
that blind the eyes of the young. *Freedom.*
Death. *A life safe for.* The Dead.

Casualties are statistics
for a rising New York Stock Market—
its ticker tapes hail the darkeyed
survivors, and cash registers
click, all over the nation, these men
deceive themselves. War is for. The Dead.

JACOB MOSQUEDA WRESTLES WITH THE ANGELS

by Rolando Hinojosa

Mosqueda doesn't believe it for one minute,
but it's true;
And although he swears he'll never forget it,
he will
As we all do, as we all should
and do.

The scraps of flesh on Mosqueda's sleeve
Belonged to Hatalski or Frazier,
one of the two;
And when they splashed there, Mosqueda screamed and fainted
And soiled his fatigues. And yet,
Unhurt and all,
He was carried off as if a casualty, and maybe he was...
But he'll forget it, in time;
In time we all do, and should.

On the other hand,
If Mosqueda had lost an arm or a leg or an eye, a nose or an ear,
He'd not forget it nor would others let him, but
One man's meat is not another's souvenir,
And so, Mosqueda will forget;
If not, he'll become a bore, and a bother, or a public nuisance.
But Mosqueda will forget;
His skin wasn't even pinked, let alone charred or burned
Or blasted into someone else's clothing
When the rocket burst. And,
When the rocket burst, Mosqueda was between the gun
And Joey Vielma, a casual visitor who came calling,
But this proves little except, perhaps, a law of probabilities.
The burst took off Hatalski's face
And Frazier's life as well; Joey Vielma caught it in the chest and face,
But Mosqueda was unhurt...

He screamed anyway,
And the other gun crews froze for an instant.
Some came running in time
To retch and gag and vomit over the dead.
As the fainting Mosqueda screamed and cried and sobbed
And yet
He was unhurt
When the rocket burst.

As for me, my hand was nicked a bit, my eyes and face peppered,

When the sun glasses broke in half;
Later, in a stagger, I came upon the binocs
Some fifteen yards away.
But, as I've said, Mosqueda was unhurt, and,
Given time,
he'll forget.

KOREAN WAR

(1950 to 1953)

“Back to the combat zone,” begins **Keith Wilson’s** poem “December, 1952” (1969). Wilson, a navy veteran, visited Korea three times during the war. While that opening verse certainly references his own repeat war experience, it also portrays a weariness no doubt felt by many service members and World War II veterans (some of whom could get recalled) at the prospect of another fight, just five years after the surrender of the Axis powers. When communist North Korea surprise-attacked U.S.-backed South Korea in June 1950, the U.S. government scrambled to react, fearing the spread of communism. The stakes were higher than before, with the Soviet Union, the U.S.’s main Cold War adversary, now possessing nuclear capabilities. With communist China and the Soviet Union supporting the North Koreans, the battle over the Korean peninsula could have easily set off World War III.

Sometimes referred to as the “Forgotten War,” Korean War veterans for decades endured public confusion over whether theirs was actually a war, or rather a “conflict” or a “police action.” Technically, there was no formal declaration of war. It was called a “United Nations police action” because the U.S., along with 21 other member-nations, rallied under the UN flag to defend South Korea (however the U.S. initiated and led the fight). But it was a war by any measure. Well over a million people died—more than half civilians—including over 50,000 U.S. service members. Conditions were brutal, with harsh winters, guerrilla warfare, and distrust between U.S. and South Korean soldiers only adding to the stress. In some cases, battlefield conditions were so bad that they’ve been compared to the trenches of World War I. Written years after he came home, Korean War veteran **Rolando Hinojosa’s** poetry collection *Korean Love Songs* (1978) describes such conditions (while also offering accounts of discrimination faced by

Chicano soldiers in the war). In “Jacob Mosqueda Wrestles with the Angels” the narrator depicts in violent detail the psychological trauma Mosqueda endures watching friends get killed in battle, while ironically insisting that Mosqueda, like everyone, will forget.

Literature by Korean War veterans was not well-received. W.D. Ehrhart and Philip K. Jason offer an explanation why in the introduction to *Retrieving Bones* (1999), one of the few anthologies of Korean War literature: “World War II and the Vietnam War each touched the very fabric of the society, altered an entire generation, and changed both the perception and self-perception of the nation on the world stage in ways that the Korean War simply did not.” Interestingly, it would be the Vietnam War that would inspire some Korean War veterans to write about their own war, often with antiwar reflections (Wilson and Hinojosa being two examples).

The Korean War, for which no peace treaty was ever signed, continues to play out today. North and South Korea remain divided at the 38th parallel, at almost the exact same boundary established at the close of World War II. Negotiations to end North Korea’s nuclear arms program still make headlines. The U.S. military maintains a force of over 20,000 in South Korea. Not surprisingly, veterans continue to write about the conflict. Most recently, Eric McMillan, a GWOT veteran, published a short story, “We Go Together” (2018), about the follies of a misfit platoon training near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in South Korea.

1. Keith Wilson “December, 1952”
2. Rolando Hinojosa “Jacob Mosqueda Wrestles with the Angels”

A DOWNED BLACK PILOT LEARNS HOW TO FLY

By Horace Coleman

"now that the war is over
we'll have to kill each other again
but I'll send my medals to Hanoi
and let them make bullets if
they'll ship my leg back and
if they mail me an ash tray
made from my F4C they can keep
the napalm as a bonus. Next time
I'll wait and see if they've declared
war on me - or just America."

THE BEST ACT IN PLEIKU, NO ONE UNDER 18 ADMITTED

By Sharon Grant Wildwind

I kissed a Negro, trying to breath life into him.
When I was a child - back in the world -
the drinking fountains said, "White Only."
His cold mouth tasted of dirt and marijuana.
He died and I put away the things of a child.

Once upon a time there was a handsome, blond soldier.
I grabbed at flesh
combing out bits of shrapnel and bits of bone
with bare fingers.

A virgin undressed men,
touched them in public.
By the time I bedded a man
who didn't smell like mud and burned flesh
He made love and I made jokes.

VIETNAM WAR

(1965 to 1975)

Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, Americans were regularly treated to gritty footage sent home by embedded reporters in Vietnam. Around dinner time, major networks aired news from the front lines, giving viewers a closer look at the war in Southeast Asia being waged in their name. Beyond the daily grind of the war, the news showed service members wounded in combat, using drugs, and saying that killing Vietnamese people “don’t mean nothing.” What Americans saw and what politicians said didn’t square.

The Vietnam War—an extremely unpopular war—shares several key similarities with the Korean War. Like its predecessor, it too was undeclared (thus explaining instances of “Vietnam Conflict,” and controversy over when it started, with some arguing as early as 1954). It was another example of the Cold War turned hot, with communist North Vietnam pushing to reclaim U.S.-backed South Vietnam in an effort to reunify the nation and dispel Western capitalist influence. Again there was distrust between allies, the South Vietnamese and the U.S. military, as well as an enemy using guerrilla tactics. And while Vietnam didn’t have the brutal winters of Korea, it did have its own harsh conditions, including dense foliage, monsoon rains, and stifling heat. Where the wars differ significantly (beyond the frequent, embedded news coverage) is in the resistance that emerged in protest of the Vietnam War—notably, among service members and veterans.

A wide-reaching antiwar veterans movement influenced everything from daily military life to legislation to poetry. In the latter half of the 60s, veterans and service members began joining antiwar protests and marches, sometimes as speakers. G.I. coffeehouses opened near bases, offering troops counterculture books and information, live music and a place to talk politics freely with fellow service members. An underground G.I. resistance press, often organized in the coffeehouses, produced over 200 newspaper titles, each featuring articles, artwork, poetry and more. Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) would grow to over 30,000 members. The organization put on hundreds of demonstrations and advocated for the rights of both veterans and the Vietnamese (and, decades later, would inspire Iraq Veterans Against the War). Published under the

auspices of VVAW, literature anthologies including *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) and *Demilitarized Zones* (1976) gave Vietnam veterans a place to share their words—a first publishing opportunity for many. Some of those authors would go on to have successful careers as writers and teachers, including Bruce Weigl, W.D. Ehrhart and Jan Barry.

War poetry by Vietnam veterans often sheds light not only on combat conditions but also on major U.S. social movements of the 60s and 70s, including the Civil Rights, Black Power and Feminist Movements. First appearing in *Demilitarized Zones*, Air Force veteran **Horace Coleman’s** “A Downed Black Pilot Learns How to Fly” (1976) succinctly expresses sentiments felt by many black troops in Vietnam: the real enemy was not North Vietnam, but rather racism at home. Similarly depicting racial tensions, former army nurse **Sharon Grant Wildwind’s** “Best Act in Pleiku, No One Under 18 Admitted” (1982) also represents the complications—and trauma—of being a young nurse in the war (women have served in the U.S. military since the American Revolution; however, the widespread use of helicopters in Vietnam put more women-nurses closer to combat, as near-death casualties were quickly flown from the fight to the field hospital).

Today, a robust community of Vietnam veteran writers and artists continues to host readings and exhibitions, trade work and run small presses. They visit literary events in Vietnam, translate Vietnamese poetry and mentor younger veteran writers. Perhaps the best example is the William Joiner Institute’s annual writing workshop, held in Boston for over 30 years. Hundreds of veterans have attended, with instructors including many of the names listed above, as well as Tim O’Brien, Yusef Komunyakaa, Fred Marchant, Kevin Bowen and more. Notably, the National Veterans Art Museum itself began as one of these communities: the Vietnam Veterans Art Group.

1. Horace Coleman “A Downed Black Pilot Learns How to Fly”
2. Sharon Grant Wildwind “Best Act in Pleiku, No One Under 18 Admitted”

WILLIAM RIVERA, PFC

By Anthony Aiello

Willie left Chicago's North Side because he didn't want to die a gangbanger like Small Change who got rained on with a .38, or Hippo—*un Puertorriqueño muy gordo*—who some Players ran down & ran over like a rat in an alley. We all wanted to grow up, move on, get over, get away from somewhere or somewhen. Willie signed on to stay alive. He raised his right hand & ended up like the rest of us at Bragg.

II

Like the rest of us who ran together, Willie & I were brothers; but Willie drank hard, could really put it away—vodka during duty, beer or rum at night; didn't mind fighting whoever he could find when drunk blind. One night he came at me with a swing & a miss, then another, then strike three. Willie kept at me until I threw him down, sank my fingers in his throat, choked my friend until his head lolled, his eyes bulged red then rolled white, & two guys pried me from his neck. Willie almost died, awoke on an Army psych ward, found himself walking in a robe & foam slippers to greet me, trade apologies with his visitor. He explained Uncle Sam's answer to AA traded Phases for the Twelve Steps. He counted them like a cadence call: One, Two, Three, & lockdown in a looney-bin makes Four. Willie got out & got drunk in celebration, but when the battery deplaned in Saudi—an entire country drier than any Carolina baptist county—Willie apologized for dragging our asses with his to Phase Five.

III

When the battery marched forth in support of the 24th Mech Infantry, our rockets blazed a tank-trail toward Basra & a battle with the Hammurabi Guards that didn't happen once the war ended, a fight that faded like sleep deprivation hallucinations edging Willie's sight—phantom jets & smoke trails that reminded him of the DT haze back on the ward or smoking PCP back in the day, on the block with friends who died. But Willie survived it all: bats & knives on the North Side, Army bullshit & Iraqi bullets. Willie saw past the shamals; in blinding sand without even a hint of the path, he saw it through, kept it cool. That was Willie: driving away from one place, ending up in the shit: from Chi-town streets to Army drunk-tank to Saudi sand-trap, & then Iraq: sand-blind in a storm—but somehow still slowly heading home.

WHY I NEVER WROTE ABOUT THE ARMY

By Karen Skolfield

Four hours a night
and we slept with our rifles,
strap twined around skinny forearms,
brass and ammo locked away
and catch on safety.

Drill Sergeant Robinson warned
that if he snuck
into our shelter halves
and nabbed a rifle,
why, we'd be pushing
Fort Dix off the map.

We laughed, our voices too high,
our camouflage paint cracking
into frightened, toothy grins.

He held a rifle over his head:

"For the next eight weeks,
this is your boyfriend!"

I thought, "girlfriend."

No one in my platoon
breathed a word the nights
Alexis crept into my bunk.

After full-pack road marches I'd wake
screaming from a charley horse,
animal sounds ragged
and out of touch with the night.

They were glad I had someone
to smooth my cramped muscles
and shut me up. And everyone
was so far from home.

Latest rumor was that
a girl in the next platoon
was getting discharged
for being queer

and I asked my ranger buddy
to point her out
but she couldn't, and me dying
to know what one looked like.

GULF WAR

(1991)

After years of so-called “Vietnam syndrome” (a term used by George Bush Sr. to describe Americans’ reluctance to enter another war after losing in Vietnam, interventions in Central America notwithstanding), the stage was set for war with Iraq. In August 1990, Saddam Hussein attacked and occupied Kuwait over an oil production conflict and boundary dispute. The U.S. government, who had ostensibly backed the criminal dictator throughout the Iran-Iraq War in the 80s, knew that if he held Kuwait he would control roughly 20 percent of the world’s oil supply. Soon after Hussein’s invasion, U.S. troops deployed to neighboring Saudi Arabia, where for the next several months they sat awaiting orders (the Saudis, worried Hussein might also attack their country, reluctantly invited U.S. protection). Finally, in January 1991, the U.S., aided by a coalition of over two dozen nations, entered Kuwait to expel the Iraqi military. After a 42-day air and (limited) ground war—with hundreds of burning oil wells blackening the sky and a “highway of death” littered with the bodies and vehicles of thousands of retreating Iraqi troops bombed by U.S. air support—Bush Sr. declared a ceasefire. Surprisingly, however, Hussein remained in power (the U.N. sanctions then imposed on Iraq, coupled with Hussein’s ongoing oppressive rule, would lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis throughout the 90s).

During the Gulf War, journalists didn’t enjoy the same degree of access they had had in Vietnam. Interestingly, however, this is when 24-hour news coverage began (CNN led the way), with major media networks employing methods of the entertainment industry. While TV viewers watched fuzzy, green-tinted live broadcasts of missile strikes, jets blasting off, and tracer rounds illuminating the night (not unlike a video game), reporters were, in most cases, escorted by government officials and getting information via military briefings. Americans didn’t get on-the-ground, embedded coverage like they had during the Vietnam War. This censorship, along with the fast, “in-and-out” nature of the operation, was no doubt planned, at least in part, to avert dissent like what emerged during the Vietnam War. Yellow

ribbon campaigns and reminders to “support the troops” (invoking the controversial idea that Vietnam veterans had been abused by protestors) likely also helped silence critical voices. Notably, today’s veteran writers, artists and activists work in a cultural climate characterized by high-production military appreciation events and the ubiquitous “thank you for your service” gesture—phenomena rooted in Gulf War-era symbols and rhetoric.

Similar to Korean War veterans, most poetry by Gulf War veterans wouldn’t come until years later. Collections like Bill Glose’s *Half a Man* (2013) and **Anthony Aiello’s** *Equipment* (2014), for example, weren’t published until after Barack Obama pulled most troops from Iraq (the second war) in December 2011. Like the war poets before them, they cover topics of grotesque violence, trauma, moral ambiguity, and technological immersion. Aiello, in particular, employs a style used by many of the Vietnam War poets, with terse language mostly free of metaphors and similes (though entire poems themselves often seem to function as metaphors for war itself). The poets also cover this era’s significant military-social issues, including the “economic draft” and “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” The former refers to the all-volunteer U.S. military’s tendency to enlist people mostly of low-income status (the official draft ended in 1973). Aiello’s “William Rivera, PFC” follows a man who leaves violence and poverty in Chicago to join the army—only to find himself involved in another kind of violence. The latter topic, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” is the 1994 policy banning gay troops from serving openly. Gulf War-era army veteran **Karen Skolfield’s** “Why I Never Wrote about the Army” (2017) provides a glimpse into life under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Notably, while this legislation was repealed in 2010, a recent ban on transgender service members (which went into effect April 2019) demonstrates the U.S. military continues to grapple with issues of inclusivity.

1. Anthony Aiello “William Rivera, PFC”
2. Karen Skolfield “Why I Never Wrote about the Army”

35 X 36

By Khadijah Queen

for GSM1

who fell out of that gash
burning

who pushed and was pushed,
shock-shook, skin

falling from her face like debris

whose adrenaline
slowed the salt-sting
of seawater bathing her

muscles, unraveling
in tiny ribbons—

who felt screams
welling in her throat, the sound of tons
of steel bending
as the world went silent

who saved a man twice her size
and only in so doing
saved
herself—

LETTER TO LIEUTENANT OWEN FROM THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Hugh Martin

-9/3/13 New Concord, OH

Still children ardent for some desperate
glory, aiming guns at Baghdad before
we're twenty. Midwest in America (you haven't
been): the reds & yellows of leaves swarm
the streets' curbs as the State talks of bombs
they'll send as a message. Simple, sir,
to drop them where you're not. Damascus—
City of Jasmine—shelled with Sarin.
What's changed since your World
War, which still we call *The Great*? Today
we name them Operations. Each speech ends
God bless America. Through the panes
of your mask that man still drowns.
& still, the soldiers: not dead, just *Fallen*.

One morning they gassed us, only once,
in northern Kentucky where America keeps
its bullion behind barbed wire. We danced—
we were made to—in a room where white steam
crawled along the walls & then we slipped
off our masks: it was like the needles of a pine
brushing my iris. Burning skin. We yelled
our Socials with snot-strings on our chins.
As you said, sir, it is sweet & right
to huff gas for one's country, to shave
for one's country because, otherwise,
the mask won't seal. Can you believe,
sir, a death from stubble? & isn't that
something: City of Jasmine. Can you imagine?

GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

(2001 to –)

A series of terrorist attacks against the U.S.—motivated by religious fundamentalism, poverty, and opposition to U.S. expansionism and hegemony—came in the wake of the Gulf War. First came the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. Then came the 1996 car bomb in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 U.S. airmen. Then, the 1998 simultaneous bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa. Later, in 2000, suicide bombers blew an enormous hole in the side of the U.S.S. Cole while it sat refueling in Yemen's Gulf of Aden, killing 17 sailors (navy veteran **Khadijah Queen's** poem "35 x 36" (2008) is about this attack). Finally, on September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda militants hijacked planes and flew them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing almost 3,000 people. Soon thereafter, George Bush Jr. called for a "Global War on Terror" and, attempting to make a complex problem appear simple, drew a line in the sand: "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." In the coming years, the U.S. would go to war with Afghanistan (now the longest running U.S. war in history), a second war with Iraq, as well as getting involved in numerous other conflicts around the world, sometimes covertly.

Perhaps more than any other American war of the past century, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) evades qualification. The title itself is like Orwell's doublespeak. "Global," of course, could mean anywhere, anytime. "Terror," a tactic rather than a sovereign state or human entity, implies anything from guerrilla warfare, to computer hacking, to anonymous death threats—the enemy is essentially undefined. While the term "GWOT" has fallen out of fashion among politicians in the 2010s, the U.S. is still deeply entrenched in the military operations kicked off by the George Bush Jr. administration in 2001, involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan especially. Black ops sites, cyber warfare, ubiquitous surveillance, unmanned aerial drones, extralegal detention, extraordinary rendition, torture, militarized police—GWOT provides context for understanding these unsettling developments. Pejoratively referred to as the "Forever War," it continues with no end in sight, while most Americans go about their daily lives.

Significantly, as military and surveillance technology evolved, the internet became ubiquitous and high quality media production capabilities

became accessible to nearly everyone. Soldiers themselves became like embedded journalists—or participant-observers—uploading helmet-cam footage, dash-cam images of IED explosions and videos of combat zone life to Youtube and other social media platforms. War blogs would also offer a direct line from the combat zone to the American household. Similar to the G.I. resistance newspapers of the Vietnam War, these blogs featured raw reflections, photos and creative writing. Colby Buzzell's memoir *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005) originated as a blog. Iraq Veterans Against the War member Garrett Reppenhagen's poem "Letter from Iraq," first posted on the blog *Fight to Survive*, became a popular Bouncing Souls song. Not surprisingly, multimedia poetry performances, often influenced by spoken word (or "slam") techniques, have become popular in the veteran arts community in recent years. The performances incorporate music, video, dance and more. Examples include The Combat Hippies' (Iraq War veterans Hipolito Arriaga and Anthony Torres') *AMAL* (2019), *Holding It Down: Veterans' Dreams Project* (2012) (featuring veteran poets Maurice Decaul and Lynn Hill) and Iraq War veteran Aaron Hughes' *Poetry Despite, Music Despite* (2019) (which features two Syrian refugee rappers and former conductor of the Iraqi Symphony Orchestra, Karim Wasfi). However, on-the-page, free verse poetry remains as popular as ever. Poets like Iraq War veterans Brian Turner and **Hugh Martin** have published collections firmly situated within the poetic tradition covered throughout this survey (Martin's "Letter to Lieutenant Owen from the Twenty-First Century" (2018) is in dialogue with Wilfred Owen's well-known World War I poem "Dulce et Decorum Est").

Veteran writing workshops, like those started by the Vietnam generation, have grown in popularity. Organizations like Warrior Writers, the NYU Veterans Writing Workshop, Words After War, Veterans Writing Project and many more, have created opportunities for veterans beyond the traditional university MFA creative writing track (of course, some veterans attend MFA programs as well—often utilizing their G.I. Bill benefits to pay tuition). Most of these organizations have published anthologies of veteran writing, like *VVAW* in the 70s. Literary journals such

as *War, Literature and the Arts, Consequence* and *O'Dark Thirty* have also published many veterans. Contests like the Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award, presented by *The Iowa Review*, have helped raise the profile of numerous emerging veteran writers. These programs and venues provide creative resources, literary communities and publishing opportunities to veterans who may have otherwise struggled in obscurity—or may have never even attempted to write a poem.

1. Khadijah Queen “35 x 36”

2. Hugh Martin “Letter to Lieutenant Owen from the Twenty First Century”

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EDUCATION

Curated by Edgar Gonzalez-Baeza

We can foster understanding and empathy through education. This is important to remember especially when learning about a group as varied and complex as military veterans. Accordingly, in order to help viewers and participants understand *On War & Survival* and the context veteran artists work in, we have compiled discussion questions and a glossary of common terminology. Using this reference, we invite viewers to discover connections between their own experiences and identities and those of veterans, as a means of finding common ground.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Note: The questions below have been paired with a learning objective from either the Common Core Language Arts Standards, or the Visual Arts Standards for the State of Illinois, indicated by the codes at the end of each question.

VISUAL ARTS/PERFORMANCE/SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

What connections can you make between the many social movements that veterans have been involved in over the past century and the artwork in these galleries? How do you see social injustices addressed visually? (VA:Cn11.1.I)--

How are the struggles that veterans endure conveyed in their artwork? How do those struggles relate to--or intersect with--the struggles that other minority communities experience? (VA:Re7.2.I)--

What are the trends, symbols, common elements and tropes that emerge as a result of World War I, repeating throughout subsequent artworks up to the present day? (VA:Re8.1.I)--

In what ways have veterans incorporated non-western cultural iconography, philosophies or enemy combatant imagery into their work? What is the overall tone of the work which incorporates these integrated images or philosophies? (VA:Cn11.1.I)--

How does the artwork of Kelly Carter or Ulysses Marshall inform what we commonly conceive of as the trauma which most veterans experience? How could the messages in their work be used to inform how we talk about trauma in other communities? (VA:Pr7.1.I)--

What issues do Cleveland Wright and Jacob Lawrence illustrate in their work? How often do we address the struggles of veterans' families in society at large? How could we better address and amplify the voices of those families? (VA:Pr7.1.I)--

How is Cleveland Wright's work in dialogue with Jessica Putnam Phillips' work, specifically regarding the roles of women at war, both abroad and after they come home? What are the unifying themes? How do these works diverge? (VA:Pr6.1.I)--

In what ways have routines and objects of everyday life been weaponized and used in war? How is that reflected in this artwork? How has military culture spread into society at large? How are these connections made more tangible by the Combat Hippies' performances and the paintings by Rodney Ewing? (VA:Pr6.1.I)--

LITERATURE

Imagine that the speakers in "Maktoob" and "next to of course god america i" meet and have a conversation about World War I. Do you think they would share the same opinions about the war? Why or why not? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C)--

Members of the political activist organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War published collections of poetry addressing issues of racism, trauma, U.S. militarism and more. How might poetry serve as an effective means of dissent? (VA:Pr6.1.I)--

In "William Rivera, PFC" Anthony Aiello offers an example of how joining the army is sometimes used as an escape from bad circumstances. What is the significance of juxtaposing gang violence with state-sanctioned war? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5)--

GLOSSARY

It's important to have a foundation of understanding when looking at artwork by veterans, especially when it's presented in an unusual context (or in a way not normally discussed in public). While you will be familiar with most of the terms below, *On War & Survival* presents these concepts in a way you may not be used to. Some will include the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition, as well as an alternative definition that is summarized, gleaned or synthesized from the composite experiences of artists, veterans and those who have gone through military training. Those without secondary definitions have been presented in a way that is specific to this exhibition.

Art as Healing - Art making is an activity which can be practiced as craft, or as a means of processing stressful or traumatic experiences.

Art as Therapy - Art making for many people is a calming and meditative activity. Many veterans turn to art making as a way to process the experiences they have gone through. Often when words fail, non-verbal expression such as art can communicate more precisely what an experience was like.

Art Therapy - Clinical treatment with a licensed professional in which art making is a tool for treatment; an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.

Collaboration - To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor.

Community - 1) A unified body of individuals. 2) A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.

Conscientious Objectors - A service member or veteran who has refused to take up arms or commit violence in order to fight in a war. Historically, chaplains, certain religious groups (such as Quakers), and medical personnel are the most common examples of conscientious objectors.

De-weaponizing - 1) To remove weapons from a space, or region. The opposite of weaponization. 2) To actively remove the lethal elements of harmful thought processes. Service members are often inculcated with such thought processes during initial combat training.

Dignity - The quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed.

Displacement - To expel or force to flee from one's home or homeland.

Enemy - 1) One that is antagonistic to another. 2) The designated target that you are willing to kill for your cause. Someone who you dehumanize and designate as "other" so that you are able to kill.

G.I. Resistance - The concerted actions and organizations led by service members in civil rights movements, war resistance, community services, and recognition of civil causes.

Honor - Good name or public esteem. To regard or treat someone with admiration and respect.

Legitimacy - 1) The quality or state of being accordant with law or with established legal forms and requirements. 2) A hierarchy of power relations used or invoked to justify conflict.

Reclaiming - 1) Rescuing something from an undesirable state. 2) Recovering something felt to be important, like an old identity, or one's humanity.

Reconciliation - 1) The restoration of friendship or harmony; the settling of differences. 2) Bringing together two disparate realities into a single coexisting truth.

Reparations - 1) Giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury. 2) Making amends through good faith gestures or monetary restitutions for an injustice a person or nation has committed.

Respect - 1) To consider worthy of high regard; to refrain from interfering with. 2) To treat others with dignity and expect others to do the same.

Selfless Service - Putting the needs of the nation and your subordinates ahead of yourself.

Service - An act of assistance; contribution to the welfare of others.

Survival - The continuation of life or existence.

Trauma - An emotional upset; a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.

Transformation - The process of changing in form or shape.

Veteran - Someone who has served in the armed forces, regardless of whether they served in an armed foreign conflict or not.

War - 1) A state of (usually) open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations 2) "...the incredible artificial weather that Earthlings sometimes create for other Earthlings when they don't want those other Earthlings to inhabit Earth any more." - Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*



NATIONAL VETERANS
Art Museum