



War In Words

Two best friends start up an organization to promote social change through written awareness

By JULIA MUNROE MARTIN

When he returned from Iraq in 2005, Ryan Weemer started writing as a way to process what he'd gone through. "It's so much easier to write about it than to talk about it. It sounds so unreal when I say it out loud," says Weemer. What started as a personal journey for Weemer led some eight years later to cofounding an organization to help other vets—the War Writers' Campaign—with the mission "to promote social change surrounding veterans' issues through written

awareness."

Cofounder Derek Porter and Weemer, both 31, met after boot camp in 2001 while serving with the Marines 2nd Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team (F.A.S.T.) Company. When they returned home in 2005, both had tough transitions: both were diagnosed with PTSD, and Porter was also diagnosed with extreme Hypervigilance Disorder. Weemer was also wounded in action in Fallujah, Iraq, in late 2004, and he was awarded the Purple Heart and Navy Commendation medal with combat distinguishing device for valor under fire.

Weemer—a writer since high school, mostly creative writing—kept a journal while in Iraq. When he returned home, he found writing helped as he struggled with PTSD and the friends he lost. "It's transformative to retell the story in an unbiased way," he says.

Porter never considered himself a writer, but on the advice of a therapist started writing as a form of "exposure therapy." He found it to be therapeutic. "The keyboard is a lifeless, soulless object that you can spill your guts out to. It doesn't judge you in any way," Porter says.

The two best friends—each describes their relationship as "closer than brothers"—watched as other vets struggled with the transition to civilian life, too, and they wanted to do something to help. Seven months ago, in a total "what if" moment, they came up with a way for vets and families to benefit from writing in the same way each of them had, and founded the War Writers' Campaign: a publishing platform to raise awareness and promote social change for veterans. But the campaign is much more than a collection of stories and memoirs—it's a way to immortalize stories and raise proceeds for vets' mental health organizations.

Shorter works (fewer than 1,500 words) are posted on the campaign website: warwriterscampaign.org. Longer nonfiction pieces and novels are published, available as either individual works or collections, printed and digital. Proceeds from sales benefit veterans' mental health organizations, such as program-partner IAVA (Iraq

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and Afghanistan Veterans of America). Contributing writers of longer works are paid a royalty.

Both Weemer and Porter are quick to point out the important educational component of the campaign. "Not only is the writing therapeutic, but at the same time it can inform civilians about the mental health issues facing vets," Porter says, whose book *Conquering Mental Fatigues: PTSD & Hypervigilance Disorder—Post War* (published by the War Writers' Campaign) is now available on amazon.com.

The response has been phenomenal. Since August 12, 2013 (when it was announced), the campaign has received hundreds of submissions—some writ-

ten by vets before Porter and Weemer were even born. They're excited to represent all generations of vets, noting that the writing and the availability to others to read the writing is what makes vets feel empowered.

"They've just been sitting on them," Porter says of some World War II vets' submissions. "They never thought they would amount to anything."

It's been a lot of work—taking all their spare time—but both men are passionate about their project and about helping other vets. "We want to change the stereotype that we don't talk about it," Weemer says. "And we'll hear more and more stories as people get more comfortable telling them."

Do You Have a Story to Tell?

The War Writers' Campaign accepts submissions written by veterans and family members of veterans. The organization accepts all genres, all lengths, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. From the War Writers' website: "To be a War Writer, there is no need to have gone to war in the literal sense—we only ask that our War Writers be veterans or family members of a veteran and be willing to share their own personal war with the world."

To submit to the campaign, please visit the submission page at <http://www.warwriterscampaign.org/#!submissions/c1erv>