

“The ‘Office Space’ of War Novels”: Susanne Aspley Interviews Brett Allen, Author of ‘Kilroy Was Here’

I first heard about Brett Allen’s debut novel, [‘Kilroy Was Here’](#), by tweet from Matt Gallagher ([@MattGallagher0](#)), author of [Empire City](#), [Youngblood](#), and [Kaboom](#). (Matt always has good reading recommendations, and this one was outstanding.) Reading this book felt like I was listening to a good war story over beers with friend. I sent Allen a DM to ask if I could interview him because I loved his book so much. Thankfully, he agreed.

Although ‘Kilroy was Here’ is billed as humorous satire, the book is deeper than just that. It’s a non-trauma hero’s classic journey to redemption through the frustrations, absurdities and intense human relationships that war brings. It’s filled with vivid descriptions such as “spooning his rucksack”, “stretched like hot mozzarella”, and “The prisoner was still there alright. His face was expressionless, but the smile carved in his neck was ear to ear.”



But don’t take my word for it, here is an excerpt:

There’s a series of sub-conscience steps taken in the seconds following an explosion. Most people don’t know this because most people have never been blown up before. First, you check yourself. It’s natural instinct. Self preservation. Call it whatever you want except selfish. Following a blast, a soldier must confirm he’s physically whole and still in possession of all critical appendages and eyeballs. The Army calls this, “Life, Limb and Eyesight.” This is a critical step before

rendering aid to comrades. It does no good fixing your buddy's broken fingers while your own leg is dangling from a bloody stump.

As to why he wrote this novel, Allen explains so in the forward:

"It is not this story's intent to down play the sacrifice of veterans, but more to dispel the notion that merely wearing a uniform makes you a hero. Like the civilian world the military is made up of all kinds: hard workers and sandbaggers, optimists and assholes, straight shooters and functional alcoholics. Most of us wore many of these hats at different times, sometimes all at once. We were never perfect, but we were always there."

Aspley: *'Kilroy' has several layers. The top layer is biting satire/comedic. LT Rye also wades through the second layer that is the tragedy of war. You write so the reader understands this but always give them a hand to pull them out so it's not totally unbearable. Did you intend to write the book this way? Or how did you decide to juggle all that's going on?*

Allen: The layers of the book happened naturally over multiple drafts and, in a way, were unavoidable when writing humor against a backdrop of war. In Afghanistan, as I'm sure was the same in Iraq and in all other conflicts, tragedy is the baseline. At its core, the entire experience of war is rooted in tragedy, with death and destruction and dominance at its beginning, middle, and end. These pieces are unavoidable in telling any war story; to not include the ugly parts would be to neglect the setting altogether. The diplomatic and logistics elements are almost equally necessary. War is chaos and these elements are the attempts to control and direct that chaos to a, hopefully, achievable goal, no matter how fruitless or absurd they may sometimes seem.

The comedy/satire piece was probably the easiest to weave in. I think a fair amount of veterans, arguably the majority, develop a pretty black sense of humor. It's a way of coping and of dealing with the stresses and realities of military life and deployment life, but the trick was finding the right level of gallows humor that would be palatable for both civilians and veterans alike. I was lucky to have some great Beta readers to help me sort through that piece. As far as juggling the events of the book, it really flowed together nicely once I picked the proper point of view. Most of the book is rooted in real events, which serve as a jumping point for the absurdities that follow.

When I first started writing *Kilroy*, I had a lot of plot, but not much story. It wasn't until I was a couple of chapters in that I rediscovered the "Kilroy Was Here" graffiti and refreshed my memory on the history there. The concept of soldiers leaving physical graffiti marks on the battlefield resonated and I began thinking about the invisible marks we leave everywhere we go. Oftentimes they are left by actions or words we may not deem important at the time, but may be impactful to others. This idea of "leaving your mark" became the thread I tied the book together with, as I know there are a lot of veterans who returned home with a "what did I even accomplish there?" mentality. I'll let the readers decide if it worked or not.



Brett Allen, author of 'Kilroy Was Here.'

Aspley: *There is a huge civilian- military divide when it comes to GWOT (or least that is my opinion). I know many veterans write books to try to bridge that gap. Most civilians can't fathom the gore and situations some vets experienced.*

But everyone has a co-worker like GIF, (the Good Idea Fairy) whose ideas are actually asinine and you want to punch them in face. Did you write 'Kilroy' with that in mind- to make it more relatable?

Allen: My initial intent was to show these characters for who they were: exaggerated versions of personalities I'd encountered in my four years of service. It wasn't until I had a few years in the civilian workforce under my belt that I realized a lot of these personalities are 100% translatable and anyone who has ever dealt with the good, the bad, and the ugly of middle management would be able to recognize a lot of the characters and sympathize with Rye's situation. I've had a couple of people describe the book as the "Office Space" of war novels and I'm extremely happy with that description.

For Kilroy, I didn't feel I should wait to write it for two reasons. First, most of the book was based on memories of actual events. I feared if I waited too long I might lose the ability to tap into the emotions experienced and the book would be less for it. Second, while I was writing, I wasn't sure if the war would ever end (only joking a little). By the time the book was published in November of 2020, eleven years had already passed since my deployment. Nineteen years since the war started. Almost as long as the stretch from WWII to Hogan's Heroes. I believe enough time had passed that the story would resonate with the older vets of the Forever War, if not the new, younger generation.

Aspley: *The story arc for 'Kilroy' is perfect, the ending felt like a blockbuster Hollywood movie climax, and I'm not just saying that. So, the question is, did you plot this book out with a proper outline hitting all the specific points, or are you a by-the-seat-of-your-pants writer- just let the characters take off and see what happens?*

Allen: Kilroy was my first attempt at long-form writing and it really forced me to learn what kind of writer I am. I can

confirm I am NOT a “by-the-seat-of-your-pants” writer. I tried that approach at the beginning. I sat down and started punching out chapters, letting the characters (I started out in the third person following two different characters) make their own decisions and just go where they led. Things went off the rails fast. Many writing sessions ended with my head softly banging on the desktop. About Chapter 13 I threw in the towel on this method. Instead of going back, I continued on in the first person, but under the pretense that everything that had happened to the characters in the first thirteen chapters had instead happened only to Rye. I also spent a solid two months mapping out the rest of the book. I had a big ol’ spreadsheet modeled on examples I’d seen used by Joseph Heller for *Catch-22* and J.K. Rowling (yes, J.K. Rowling) for *Harry Potter*. It served its purpose and I slogged through the remainder of the first draft using the spreadsheet as a road map (insert “Lieutenant with a map” joke here) and modifying it as I went. Once the first draft was finished, I went back and completely rewrote the first thirteen chapters in the first person, which was actually fairly easy because I now knew where Rye needed to end up. I should note I read many different books on novel writing while writing *Kilroy* and I tried a lot of different techniques. Ultimately I ended up blending the pieces I liked. I learned a lot during the process, but not before doing it the wrong way a bazillion times.

Aspley: *Eric Chandler wrote a poem, ‘Air Born’, for his poetry collection, [Hugging this Rock](#). In it, Chandler’s favorite porta-potty graffiti was ‘Toodles, Afghanistan.’ My favorite was in Kuwait, which read, ‘Saddam sucks’. Besides ‘Kilroy was Here’, was there any other graffiti that you really liked?*

Allen: I do not recall any specific graffiti from the deployment outside of the widely overused and unoriginal bathroom stall “Here I sit all broken hearted...” mantra (maybe only a few people will know what I’m talking about here...

Google it if you dare). I do, however, have a graffiti-based story from deployment that didn't make the final cut of the book. Outside our FOB's Command Post there was one lonely port-a potty (much like in the book). The port-a potty was mainly used by the Squadron Staff, as the larger, semi-permanent and multi-person toilet trailer was a much farther walk, being centrally located in the Troop housing area. One day the Squadron Commander entered the CP hopping mad and started chewing folks out (not entirely uncommon). Turns out, someone had tagged the port-a potty wall with a rather uncomplimentary (and profane) assessment of the SCO's leadership abilities. Since the culprit could not be identified, the port-a potty was made off limits to EVERYONE for about a month—in the dead of winter. So everyone in Squadron Headquarters had to trudge through the snow and ice and ankle breaking gravel, across the FOB to use the bathroom. I'm pretty sure it was uphill both ways. War is hell.

Aspley: *I read your two short stories on Kindle, "Post" and "Kherwar." Are you considering releasing a short story collection next? Or what is your next writing project?*

Allen: I have a series of short stories I've begun to brainstorm, but nothing more than that. The stories would be stand-alones, but may also be strung together to fit a broad narrative; I haven't decided. I am a big fan of Ray Bradbury's "The Martian Chronicles", which has been an inspiration for the structure. Before I develop that further, though, I'm working my way through my second novel. I'm currently on the third draft of another satirical fiction piece which I'm particularly excited about. This one will be a bit of a departure from *Kilroy* in that it's not military themed. It follows a contentious mayoral election in a small Michigan town and ties in pieces of the legend of the Michigan Dogman. I'm hoping to complete it soon, but my wife and I both work full time, and with two small children, writing projects are slow and often only advance in the wee morning hours or after

everyone else in the house has gone to bed. In a way, though, I think it makes the end product better because it forces me to think longer on parts I may have just pencil whipped otherwise. In other ways, it's brutal and the anxiety often builds to the point of spontaneous combustion. I think that's how most writers feel, though, especially early on, so I think I'm doing it right. Or at least not entirely wrong.

Aspley: Thank you, Brett for your time, and looking forward to your next book!

Allen, Brett. [Kilroy Was Here](#). A15 Publishing, November 2020.

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Twitter: @hogwashwriting

Website: www.hogwashwriting.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/BrettAllenAuthor>

New Flash Fiction from Drew Pham: “On Their Lips, the Name of God”

This is the memory that stays with him as his blood abandons the body and life fades—this, the one comfort that will carry him into the next life. Dawran had waited beneath a mulberry tree in May of last year. He'd come to love mulberries in a small way—they'd always kept him company through the boredom

of waiting. It was still cool in the mornings and evenings, the breeze shaking the branches, dropping the still tart clustered berries. So strange that trees bearing fruit must sacrifice their children to live. How an animal carries that seed away—the length of a kilometer, a province, a nation, to plant and bloom again. In this way, the child's sacrifice meant something. He'd liked that.

He remembers Zafar's simple house. Not more than a small compound with a low wall and one building, one shed. The gate opened, Zafar standing there in the vestibule with his daughter propped on his hip; the dim outline of a woman behind them. A handsome woman and child. Zafar put the girl down, kissed her once on each cheek, on the forehead, and on both cheeks again. He turned to his wife, and the woman smiled. The sight of Zafar's family brought Dawran thoughts of the future, of blooming. At least, that's how he likes to remember it—a smiling wife, a doted-upon child. Things he'd hoped to have one day, but never would.

Zafar took him up to the mountainside, where they could see the whole valley. They took a small bag. Some naan. Dried nuts and fruit. Rice. They had some work to do. Checking vantage points, watching the Americans and the government troops and police, drawing up maps of the improvements the Americans made to their little outpost. These soldiers were tired or lazy or scared, so they rarely ventured out, and the summer that followed was as quiet and peaceful as anyone could hope. Before they began their descent down the mountain, a pair of shepherds came across their path, offered them a little food and tea. They sat in a little basin in the foothills, where soil had accumulated over the years from all the sediment washed down from snow melts. While the flock grazed or huddled together or slept, the men sat around the fire, telling tall tales, reciting couplets of poetry, and resuscitating dead memories. They ate, drank tea, watched the half-disc moon crawl up the sky, trading places with the sun. The insects in

the green valley below sang their song. Torch flies lit the marshy canal beds and mountain streams. A stray dog howled, and Dawran felt himself fortunate for his belly, now full with warm meat and gravy.

He remembers being thankful for Zafar, who'd had always been a patient eater. Methodical. Careful. And Dawran loved watching his mouth take some things whole, tear other things off in small bites, and seeing the thin film of grease form, his lips reflecting a little of all that moonlight. In the dark, his commander's skin seemed more like polished stone than flesh. More than that, he loved listening to Zafar speak. He told a story about a book his father had brought back from Russia, about a giant fish and the mad fisherman who'd pursued it. *We do such insane things for love*, he'd said, tracing the outlines of the mad seaman's obsession. He'd said it was love that'd driven him to madness, that he'd loved hunting the enormous fish, for it was the fish that gave him life, it was the fish that'd given him purpose.

Dawran remembers all the questions he'd had of the strange tale, questions that, when he gazed at Zafar, he knew he already the answers to. He had thought on that while the meal warmed his belly, and the fire drying the sweat from his clothes. Love deriving from purpose comforted him. It meant he could say he loved Zafar, this man who'd given him purpose, given his life meaning. And he'd learn how far that insane love would take him, but he'd stay loyal. He would slaughter a fat landlord with a knife, bomb his countrymen, and in his last living moments, watch his beloved commander flee from the field. He remains, above all things, loyal.

Even with the moon, they'd climbed high enough to not want to risk broken bones on their descent. So they spent the night there, camped with the shepherds around their little fire. They had only one blanket—Zafar's—and Dawran was happy to let him have it, despite the night's still chilly air. But the man told him not to be foolish, it was common practice for

fighters—indeed a common practice among soldiers everywhere—to make spoons of their bodies and nestle close to share heat. He'd assented, curled himself in his commander's embrace, his body like that of an infant in the womb, and listened to Zafar's strong, steady breath, took in his musk-smelling of damp soil and leather and burnt powder—and fell drowsy to the steady metronome of Zafar's heart against his ribs. They slept the whole night through, neither man moving a centimeter from the other. Through every challenge, every moment of doubt, every difficult choice, Dawran remembers this night above all nights. When the rooster woke the morning, Zafar shook Dawran awake. Soon, they heard the muezzin in the valley below singing the call to prayer. The two stood side by side, knelt in unison, their bodies bending as one, and on their lips, the name of God.



Photo by Drew Pham

New Flash Fiction from Elise Ochoa: “Desert Crossing”

If you've never seen a desert, I mean, a *real* desert, you'd think the sand looks like murky brown water rippling in the wind. Sometimes I would tell myself that, as I traversed the barren land of sand and dunes. I wandered the desert for so long, my face was wrinkled around the eyes from squinting through the sun. My eyebrows were always raised; my forehead had ripples too. Did I see Someone?

On the days a light breeze brushed the sand, I imagined the dust rising like ocean spray after a wave. But then my tired

feet would burn with the heat, and I'd have to keep trudging. Occasionally there would be people: tourists, scientists, gypsies. They'd pass me water. I'd take it without a smile. I always left them with my lips as dry and cracked as they were before. I never got hopeful when I crossed these types. They weren't you.

✘ My lips were waiting for you. My lips were waiting for your cool, sweet dew. When my heart began to tell me you were near, I would go whole hours sitting in the sand, just daydreaming of you. I twirled my long, knotted hair around my fingers. I cradled piles of sand in the form of you. Those days, it was even harder to set out across the barren land than during the hottest sun-drenched days.

My heart told me you were coming. And my heart found me the oasis. It told me where the palms were. It told me where the underground spring was bubbling up. When I found the tall green palms and the low green shrubs, my hunchback straightened. I no longer needed to bow against the wind. I stood tall; my eyes widened.

Tangled among the shrubs were myriad silks, pillows, jewels. I untangled the silks, polished the jewels, scrubbed the pillows until they shone as bright as my eyes. I worked day and night, drinking from the natural spring, energized, building for you. I grew dates and pomegranates and juicy melons. No longer skin and bones, I had hips for you to grab from behind and caress.

I saw you coming from many dunes away. I knew your heart was leading you to the oasis, to me. It was a windless day. The air was clear. I saw your strong shoulders first, then your long legs, then your touseled hair. Details came slowly. I bathed in them all.

Soon, you weren't just a shadow. You were a man. A man with scruff. Thirsty, like I once was. But, unlike me, you were confident. Lost, but not *lost*.

As you approached, your thin sandals kicked up the sand behind you. I stood at the entrance of the palms, with lavender silks, gold cushions, white melons surrounding my beautiful silhouette. With my elbows at my sides and my palms up, I opened myself to you with a smile.

You squinted in my direction. You coughed, dry, short. My smile faltered slightly. You wiped your forehead with the crook of a glistening arm. My heart fluttered. I ran for the fresh spring water. I ran toward you with the water. Like gold, I offered it.

But, like the heat, I must have wavered in your eyes. A fiction.

You blinked me away. Just a dune.

Your form grew smaller and smaller to my eyes. They bleared until you disappeared. Invisible, I covered like Romeo, slowly dying at the feet of your not-coffin.

New Nonfiction from Philip Alcables: “Peppina”



1. A Child

A neglected box in the back of my closet contains a contain a collection of items from my father’s apartment, I find. In the midst of a stack of curling black-and-white photo prints there is one that I don’t remember having seen before. About two inches by three, it’s a photo from the war. My father’s war, the one he referred to as “the” war. It’s a picture of a girl

of eight or nine or ten, a bow on the right side of her dark hair, her mouth wide, dark eyes squinting slightly into the sun. She's wearing a pinafore that is just a little too big for her. She is sitting tenuously—posed?—atop a low wall. On the back of the print, written in cursive in a feminine hand, is one word: "Peppina."

Who are you, *signorina*?

The photo is clearly from Italy. My father had been a bombardier-navigator on a B24 crew in the 15th US Army Air Force, based at Pantanella, east of the Apennines. It would be 1944, then. In the photo, the sun is shining bright, casting onto Peppina a shadow of the trunk and limbs of a tree that must have been behind the photographer. In the background, an American enlisted man in a flight cap and leather jacket is leaving a building, oblivious to the photographing going on nearby. He's also squinting against the Italian sunshine.

Who took your photo? Definitely not my father: he hated taking photographs, all his life. From the war, he kept photos of himself, his plane, his crew, some pictures of bombing targets, a few shots taken through the right-side waist gunner's window of the other B24s of his squadron, up above the Alps. But why did my father have your photo at all? And why did he keep it for so long—for the sixty-eight years remaining to him?

I wonder if you were one of those poor *bambini Pugliese*, the ones whose hunger and misery he mentioned often during my childhood, especially when I wouldn't finish my supper. But in the photo you look clean and your clothes aren't ragged. You seem healthy.

Were you the daughter of someone who worked at the base, maybe a cook or a cleaner? My father was always at ease with children (far more so than he ever was with adults; he always seemed to feel that adults had some racket going). Children's

openness to the world matched his. Children are ever on their way to becoming something but never there yet.

Or were you the younger sister of an Italian girl he loved? My father grew up speaking *Ladino* (or Judaeo-Español), late-medieval Spanish with some Hebrew, Arabic, and sometimes Greek or Turkish mixed in. His parents were Sephardim born in the Ottoman Empire, who had come to New York in the 1910s as teenagers. Speaking what his family called *Spanyol*, he understood enough Italian, and could make himself understood. And he *looked* Italian: black hair and olive skin, a slim boy with kind eyes (and a handsome uniform). So was there a girlfriend? Other, I mean, than the young woman back home in Queens who would become his wife and my mother. Were you the sister of a Laura, a Rafaella, an Antonella—someone he couldn't speak of?

Or had your photo originally belonged to an unlucky buddy of my father's? Did one of the bombers miss the landing strip? Was the photo retrieved after the men of the 777th Squadron brought in the bodies of the dead, after someone went through the pockets of their charred uniforms and gave the snapshot to my father for safekeeping? Did he keep it for so long because it was a memorial to a dead friend?

2. Fate

Early on, I learned that a person in war needs luck. The belongings of the dead signal something about luck in the drama of Fate. To discard what the universe has touched is to play with Fate. When I was growing up, my father had no patience for men who proclaimed their heroism in WWII. *His* treasure was, forever, a specific commemoration of the play of Fate: eating real (i.e., not powdered) scrambled eggs after returning from a mission. Eating scrambled eggs was not just a pleasure for him, but a kind of celebration of good luck. Call it grace.

My father said he had been lucky to be on a crew whose commander was a competent pilot. The man was a “son of a bitch” (the third most disparaging epithet my father could bestow, after “bastard” and “prick” but before “schmuck”), but he was a good leader. My father was also lucky not to have been a gunner. He was 5 foot 6, there weren’t too many men who were shorter than he was, and the shortest gunner was generally assigned to the ball turret. Even before I read Jarrell’s poem, I knew what happened to ball-turret gunners.

He was lucky that his plane didn’t malfunction, drop out of the air, skid off a runway. He was lucky when cloud cover hid his plane from radar. He was lucky that the flak (he tended to refer to it with the onomatopoeic “ack-ack”) never brought his plane down. He was lucky that, after his crew came back over the Alps into Italy, fighter planes piloted by Tuskegee Airmen—the Red Tails, as he called them, whose record of safely escorting Army Air Force bombers was the best of all fighter groups—brought him back to base safe.

He was lucky that he didn’t fall out through the open bomb bay doors. Sometimes a bomb would get fouled on the rack and fail to drop. It was the bombardier’s job to walk out on the narrow catwalk (no parachute because he couldn’t fit through the hatch with it) and finagle it loose with his boot, the terrain of Czechoslovakia or Romania rushing past a few thousand feet below, just a skinny young man in a lined flight suit, freezing air, wind, gravity, and luck.

He was lucky to be a Jew. The story, which he told more than once, was that a flight-training commander, a Southerner whom he knew to be an anti-Semite, had flunked him out of pilot training after only one trip up in the open-cockpit trainer. You were supposed to get two chances, he said, but this guy (“the bastard”) had learned that he was a Jew and failed him after only one flight. The Army sent him to navigator and bombardier training instead, and then shipped him to Italy. The luck of it, he said, was that if he had become a fighter

pilot, he was sure, the Messerschmitt 109s would have made short work of him.

My father's universe was thoroughly perfused with mystery, although nothing made him like religion, not even being shot at. He never prayed in any conventional way. Religious rites to him were a kind of farce: people put on costumes and bow or kneel, fast or feast—putting on the agony, he always called it, from a 1920's music-hall song: "puttin' on the agony/puttin' on the style." Making too much of yourself. As if, for *you*, the universe cares.

Fate is the universe's lack of interest in you. You do your best, you live your life, and the universe either looks after you, or it doesn't. My father's mother died of a heart condition when she was 23 years old. His mother's father had a heart attack on the stairs to the Third Avenue Elevated not long after that. He died, too. My father's aunt Fortunée, who had moved from the ancestral home in Edirne, Turkey, to France in the 1930s, survived the Nazi occupation in Paris by passing for a gentile. Her brother, his uncle Gabriel, died in the camps. My father was not yet 4 when his mother died, but he lived to age 89.

When my father did die, in a hospice in the Bronx, Hurricane Sandy blew into New York. Trees fell. The seas overtopped the land. It has made me feel that he was probably right about the universe and Fate.

3. Children

Even before I knew anything about fighters and bombers, battles, missions, weapons, camaraderie, uniforms, or luck in battle, I learned that war is about children. I learned that I was fortunate beyond measure to live without either war or poverty. I was a child myself, probably 5 or 6 years old, when my father first told me about the ragged children of Apulia. I had decent clothing and I didn't know real hunger. My father

had been poor as a child—raised, as he liked to remind me, in a walkup tenement whose residents shared toilets, one water closet in the hallway on each floor, near the stairs. Those Italian children around his base were even poorer than he had been.

That my father was barely more than a child himself when he flew on bombing missions, that the bombs he dropped from his airplane onto oil refineries or marshalling yards must have injured or killed people and that some of those people were children—those things only dawned on me later. That his airman buddies would also have been barely out of childhood. The girls in Naples, where he went once on leave, must also have been children, too. Sexually knowledgeable, but still children.

When I was in my teens, “the war” was the one in Vietnam. To my view, it involved American children, not much older than me, killing Vietnamese children, as well as adults, with horrific weaponry. The son of my mother’s friend, a boy two years older than me, flew with a Medevac helicopter crew; they shipped his remains home. When I played second base, the shortstop was a classmate whose older brother had died in Vietnam. Among us 9th and 10th graders, arguments for and against that war were so *personal*. War seems like something that 14- and 15-year-olds shouldn’t have to know about. Yet so often it’s their whole world.

Morally outraged by the war in Vietnam, preoccupied with it, and of course mortally frightened that I might be drafted and forced to fight it, I asked my father what had prompted him to volunteer for the military in *his* war. At first, the answer was that he had always been fascinated by airplanes, and wanted to be a flier. Another answer was that he didn’t want to be drafted; once the war broke out, he knew that draftees would go into the infantry or a tank unit. Later, he said that he had had to “fight Hitler.” By the time he was in his

eighties, the reason had been that he had felt he had to stop Hitler from killing Jews.

I'm sure he meant all of those. Motivations are complex, after all, and elusive. The poignant one, never expressed to me but always evident, was his connection to a universe that was magically full of possibility. America should stand for something—something that Europe had lost, or reneged on. Not freedom, which everyone talks about. Something more like fairness. Or just beneficence, spread as widely as could be. Which amounts, I suppose, to *hope*. Strange as it sounds, I think my father fought for hope.

I watched the 1968 Democratic National Convention on the TV in our living room with my parents and their friends Stan and June. The set was tuned to CBS; the avuncular Walter Cronkite was in the broadcasting booth in Chicago. I remember the night air, the August humidity, the front and back doors open in hopes of catching a breeze, all of us drinking the lemon-flavored iced tea that my mother let me prepare from a Lipton packet and tap water, poured over ice into tall glasses. Maybe the green floor fan, much older than I was, was moving some air around the room. The adults were talking about Hubert Humphrey and LBJ; about Allard Lowenstein, a friend of friends of theirs and a delegate at the convention; about the war.

The televised coverage cut to scenes on Michigan Avenue, where policemen were pushing young demonstrators to the ground, clubbing them—even the girls, to my astonishment— and hauling them into vans that would take them to jail. Beating American children on live television. Not Black children in Alabama, which my parents decried but seemed to attribute to a system that they were sure would soon collapse, but *white* children. Kids who looked like me, just a few years older (indeed, some of them were the older siblings of friends of mine). Beating children not in Montgomery but Chicago.

I stood up from the floor, where I had been sitting, my mouth

fallen open, speechless. My father stood from the sofa where the adults were seated. "No!," he cried out in the hot night. "Not in America!! This is *America*! We don't do that *here*! It's not what we fought for!" Anguish was in his voice, heartbreak on his face.

White kids beaten by police and arrested, Black kids beaten by police and arrested. In our largely Jewish neighborhood of small private homes with neat yards, my father was among the outspoken upholders of civil rights for Black Americans. I know he was furious at the Jim Crow laws down South, lynchings, assaults on civil rights demonstrators. Among all the disturbing news in the papers in the 1960s, it was the brutality of Southerners toward Black citizens to which he always drew my attention. Separate water fountains. Beatings, dogs, and fire hoses. We studied the civil rights movement together, he and I. He explained to my friends the civic and moral value of social programs, why they weren't just for "freeloading" by "the Negroes." He complained to our local civic association about their pressuring homeowners in the neighborhood not to sell to Black families. When he finally moved out of the house, he sold it to a Black couple.

Yet, it took police violence against white kids to break his heart. My father and his buddies, all those middle-aged men I knew who, in their late teens or early twenties, had waged the Second World War—Irv on a PT boat, Gene in a tank, Cousin Willie with the infantry landing at Normandy, my father in his B24, and others—they saw the campaign for Black rights as akin to their own. Akin to, but not *of*.

4. Becoming

I sensed that my father and his friends had always known what they were fighting *against* in WWII. But if they thought about what they were fighting *for*—and I'm not sure it was ever a conscious thought, perhaps just a kind of embodied drive—they would have said that they aimed to uphold something that was

inchoately American. Hence my father's anguish at the police riot in the streets of Chicago in 1968. But also something still incomplete. This incompleteness of the American project distinguishes it from the fully fleshed-out process that makes Germany German, France French, or Hungary Hungarian, or can seem to. An Englishman might yearn for the "sceptered isle"; Americans have nothing to yearn for, so we must hope.

I've never seen the dialectical nature of hope that white Americans, including those WWII fighters whom I came to know, have so clearly as I do today, with marches for Black Lives Matter. It's never been so clear to so many white Americans that the double edge of the hope we harbor needs to be examined. We who have been admitted to the club of whiteness are free to wonder whether the political norms, cultural traditions, and economic verities of American life really do constitute progress toward a more justice society, and therefore grounds for hope—or if no republic and no set of mores can withstand the ruthless demolition of civilization by the historical engine of capitalism, and therefore that hope is beside the point. This dialectic is a luxury, however lugubrious the debate sometimes feels.

If hope is the residue of an inner sense that the American project is incomplete, then the failure to extend that project to Black Americans—the unwillingness of the Army to integrate until it was forced by Harry S. Truman; the persistence of Jim Crow in the South despite America's ostensible victory over tyranny in the war; the even longer persistence (to this day) of unequal opportunities for education, housing, and employment between Black and white Americans; and the mass incarceration of Black men—has amounted to a refusal to include Black Americans as fully worthy of considering hope. That is, as fully American. To say that Black Lives Matter is, in this sense, to assert not merely the simple truth that the count of Black bodies slain by police ought not to exceed that of white or other bodies, but that the meaning of American

life, which is supposed to be to question whether there are grounds for hope, has been denied systematically to Black Americans.

I think it was hard for my father and his liberal friends to see how to complete the American project. I think it was hard for them to acknowledge just how excluded Blacks were, and how systemic that exclusion was. They were young, for one thing. My father and many of his friends were highly educated by the time I got to know them in the '60s, but back when they had been in the armed forces during WWII, they were just out of high school. Most had never been outside of New York, let alone North America. They thought they wanted the best for everyone, but the "everyone" they knew were Jews who had struggled, Italian-Americans who had struggled, Greek-Americans who had struggled. People who were in the process of becoming white. That Black Americans were still struggling meant, I'm sure they believed, that things would eventually turn out well for Blacks, too, just as things had turned out well for their parents, their friends' parents, and themselves.

To my father, that was the luck of being born in America: *things could work out*. You had to be on guard for hate, but the Constitution and the laws would spread justice. The system would work for Black Americans. (The truly unlucky, to liberals of my father's crowd, were the ones born in Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and so forth: even those who hadn't been extinguished by the Nazis were impoverished by the broken postwar economies, subjugated by authoritarian governments, sentenced to the Gulag for crimes they weren't aware of, etc. *Theirs* was the bad luck of birth.) Black Americans, to them, had been as lucky as they had. Their time would come. "Their," not "our."

There is also the naiveté. Not just of those boys fighting WWII who couldn't quite see that they were not fighting for *all* Americans, but the necessarily naïve illusion behind the

whole American project. There is only one way to accept America as a work in progress: that the country is essentially ahistorical, that America has no historically constituted Truth, only the remnants of yesterday and a weird, often unsatisfying, and hotly debated vision of tomorrow. To include Black Americans means recognizing multiple visions of tomorrow, differently burdened by yesterday. To include all Americans is to act like a small child, making new friends at the beach or playground, naïve to differences of upbringing because of a focus on rebuilding the sand fortress or taking turns on the slide.

To my father, the world was populated by beings who are continuously *becoming*, never fully complete. Did this come from his experience in WWII? From observing the play of Fate, the universe's mocking of human self-importance, the seriousness of small children with too little to eat?

Beings who are always becoming. I haven't known war first-hand. I envisage it as an elemental state, a naked encounter with an unforgiving universe. If you are not becoming something, you are dead. If you are lucky, you are alive. Nobody gets to be who they aren't, but if they're lucky they get to keep becoming. You live your best life and the universe does what it will.

Is this why wars are always about children? Because children are always in the act of becoming and war separates becoming from being? I still wonder why my father, believer in Fate, spoke of children and not of death. Peppina, enigmatic child of war, what were you becoming in 1944? Did Fate, in the form of war, deal you a favorable hand? If you had the luck to survive, then you would be 85 years old today, or thereabouts. What do you tell your grandchildren about the war, the American airmen you met, their naïveté, their hope? Knowing what you know, what are you becoming now?

New Flash Fiction from Mason Boyles: “Parched”

The hermit lived in the water tower with an alligator, both of them long-gone paler than moon. Their eyes gemmed the same pink in front of a flashlight. The hermit’s skin was scaly with scabs. His gums were too big for his lips to close over them. Some speculated that these traits were adaptive, or contracted; others insisted that the hermit had been born this way. He prompted various fictions of origin. The gator was a carnival prize won with marksmanship or a mallet-strike, some squinting feat of darts and balloons. The hermit had cast-netted it out of the sound. He’d chipped a golfball into its mother’s throat at a fatal angle and salvaged her sudden orphan from the water trap where it marinated. The hermit himself was a fugitive or dead celebrity. His retreat to the water tower was an act of grief, shame, or self-restraint. Lusting after a wrong object, he’d cloistered himself in that tank to confine perverse cravings. Regardless, he was up there: adrift on an inflatable dinghy, pale and long-mouthed and drained. The town coped with their bafflement by containing it in a holiday. The last week of every August the tank’s door was unbolted and the mayor laddered up the tower with a mic to conduct an honorary interview. The bank closed at lunch for this. The school declared a half-day. Everyone pooled at the base of the tower to catch the hermit’s proclamations crackling over the Shriners’ borrowed P.A.



He began with a purpose statement. He called the dark silk, claiming the tank was his cocoon. He explained the discipline of stillness, how he strove toward a torpid and unmuscled

state. He enjoyed practicing shadow puppets with the flashlight on breaks. He'd never grown wisdom teeth. His waist size was twenty-eight. He had loved precisely once, like a flood: a drowning, destructive, lung-hogging sensation. He'd cocooned himself in the tank to escape. The love ebbed, but his insides still bore its watermark, a scourged and porous stain of a shade. The hermit siphoned off the haunt of it with his own hand when he had to. He burst blindly into the damp heat of the tank.

Spectacular, said the mayor.

After the hermit's speech the floor was opened for questions. Most of these were procedural. The children wanted to know what the hermit ate. The parents wanted to know how he prayed. Their parents wanted to know if the hermit was coming down anytime soon so they could decide whether or not to keep putting up with no-starch diets, with catheters and radiation and nostrils chapped from tubed oxygen. They wanted to know what the hermit coming down would signify. Didn't a cocoon imply a transformative exit? Wasn't it an interstitial state? But no one asked why the hermit had gone up there. They kept their questions confined to the ways that he stayed.

One year a bone-old man came around. He'd lurked unnoticed until the Q and A, at which point he raised his cane and—before being called on—began making autobiographical claims. He explained he'd been born here too far back for anyone but the hermit to remember. He'd been drowned and undrowned in that very water tower. He'd basked in the breaths of the man who'd breathed air back into him. He'd inhaled that man's exhale, a gust that silked down his throat and spun a cocoon through his lungs. The man's mouth had crawled into his. He'd wanted to cocoon the man, stow the man, hold him within until his own ribs bulged and broke with jerky ecloses. But he'd been too young. A boy only. He'd left town, but was back now, here to release the long-fluttering thing in his lungs. The bone-old man asked to be taken to the water tower.

He claimed there was a kind of mistake that transformed as it aged.

Folks browed their hands over eyes, squinting. Frayed panting came through the P.A. The hermit limbed out to daylight, then, not bone-old but skin-old, his skin too small for his skeleton and sunburning at a visible rate.

"You came," he said. "You came. You came. You came."

The fire chief helped the bone-old man into the bucket of the tiller truck and lifted him up to the tank. The hermit kissed the bone-old man on his scalp, and the bone-old man kissed the hermit's eyes, which now looked less like gems than mussels shelled in his face. The hermit's gums looked like a swallowed animal striving out of his mouth.

"Well," said the mayor, and climbed down the ladder. The fire chief backed the truck away. The tellers went back to the bank; the children went back to the classrooms, and the principal redacted the half-day. And the hermit helped the bone-old man down the ladder of the tank. They descended without palm fronds, walking off hand-in-hand-upon-cane.

The couple became the barnacle kind of locals. They sat side-by-side in porch rockers and corner booths, sessile, so still and plain-sight that folks went blind to them. Folks got the vague sense of a seal broken when passing them, the exposure of a thing stale from being too-long stashed away. There was the vague sense that holiness had a half-life; that a sacred thing left alone long enough would decay to the profane.

After a time it was posited that the water tower did no favors for the skyline. It was toppled that August, to applause, dissected by a Shriner-operated crane. A desalination plant was constructed in its place. It reverse-osmosed water from the Atlantic, straining off salt through membranes and boweling its product into flexuous tanks. There were those who claimed the tap still tasted salty. No one ever asked what the

alligator ate.

Larry Abbott on Warrior Songs, Vol. Three: “The Last Thing We Ever Do: Vietnam Veterans Speak Truth”

Warrior Songs is a series of albums created under the direction of Iraq War veteran Jason Moon, profiled [here](#) in Wrath-Bearing Tree (October 2020). With the release of Warrior Songs’ third CD, this time focused around the Vietnam War, journalist Larry Abbott wanted to revisit this collective effort among veteran-musicians to create musical anthologies around their experiences.

[The Last Thing We Ever Do: Vietnam Era Veterans Speak Truth](#) will be officially released on August 8 to coincide with the 57th anniversary of the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The CD, featuring 14 cuts, is a collaboration of 19 Vietnam vets with 21 professional musicians and songwriters to create an eclectic compilation of rock, jazz, blues, and blue grass-inspired stories of the war and its aftereffects. The project involved 81 studio musicians and 14 studios in the United States and Vietnam. A total of 109 artists, 17 of whom are Vietnamese, were involved in creating the CD. The diversity of musical styles mirrors the diversity of the stories, from the Selective Service System to combat to coping with returning to the U.S., civilian life, and moral injury. In all, the songs on the CD chart the three stages of war: “going, there, and back.”



“Conscription” tells of the “going” phase of war and was a group effort by members of Vets on Frets and Lisa Johnson. The original poem was written by John Zutz and concerned the anxiety of waiting for one’s draft notice or lottery number.

The question of going and returning (or not), is at the core of “Conscription,” the first song on the CD. The narrator duly signs up for the draft at age 18 and as the lottery approaches his “nerves are taut as wires.” He has seen the war on television and the conflict that looked so far away could suddenly become *his* reality, a reality of “Rice paddies, helicopters, Agent Orange and a jungle trail, . . . ” Reminiscent of Creedence Clearwater’s “Fortunate Son” the song also takes a jab at the privileged who scheme their way out while “The rest of us stuck in the draft are left without a plan” and have to wait for Uncle Sam’s decision. There is a tone of resignation in the refrain “oh, conscription.”

Other songs tell of perhaps unexpected experiences, like “Seawolf 7-6” by Kyle Rightley and Bill Martin. Martin was a helicopter gunship pilot with the Seawolf Squadron whose call sign was Seawolf 7-6. On his stops in various villages he entertained children with magic tricks and quickly developed a rapport with the youngsters, especially at an orphanage near his base. The song recounts his experiences performing his shows. At one performance a girl approached him “with unmistakable fear in her eyes” and told him that the VC were coming and that he and his crew had better leave. “This brave girl/Saved my life on that day.” His experiences stayed with him: “Seawolf 7-6, in the end, it’s all about the kids/And I fly my gunship high through all of my dreams./Seawolf 7-6, what a magical life I’ve lived. . . . ”

Another song takes a different approach to the war experience.

It does not deal with combat but with a subject that could be of equal importance: music. Doug Bradley served in Vietnam as an information specialist. While a professor at the University

of Wisconsin (from which he recently retired after three decades) he and Craig Werner co-authored *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War* (2015), which discusses the music of the times and the impact of the music on the “grunt.” His song, “Look Out Sam,” created with Kyle Rightley, shows that music was a survival mechanism by providing an escape, however temporary, from the constant presence of injury and death : “Albums, tapes, DJs played on the AFVN/And just for a while they would help you feel at home/Look out Sam we’re staring down a gun/Running through a jungle that you can’t outrun/But far from home the music gave us grace/And we all sang ‘we gotta get out of this place.’” The song also shows that music can create a bond among troops and be instrumental to the post-war healing process.

✘ The after effects of war, moral injury and PTSD, felt upon the return home, is the subject of “Disquieted Mind” by Jeff Mitchell and Steve Gunn. Gunn, who was a combat medic, talks of his moral injury but also holds out the possibility of healing and recovery, however tenuous. In what could be a memory of destruction Gunn writes “I did not look back to study your face/ And all that we were leaving behind/But now I see you/And I know what we’ve done/For I have a disquieted mind” But he also avers that “I can build you something out of my love” even if it might take the rest of one’s life.

Similarly, “Face Down,” by the Mambo Surfers, posits that the effects of war can last a life time, but also that the effects can be mitigated and lead to healing. The song, based on the story of a Marine Corps vet, tells of his sexual assault when first arriving at his combat team. After the incident he was able to psychologically survive, lead his men, and regain his true self. He still carried the experience but was able to turn the experience around to help others. His story into song generates healing:


*If betrayal or deceit has left you in pain, hopelessly broken
And indifference or denial have left the wounds weeping and
open*

*I want to reach you with this song, soothe what hurts and make
it good*

*I want to reach you where you hurt, walk away from the edge
with you*

“Cracks and Patches” is based on Brent MacKinnon’s battle with the effects of Agent Orange. MacKinnon was a corporal in Vietnam from 1966-68 and was exposed to Agent Orange. As cancer took hold he sought to heal his soul through the arts and connecting to other vets. One aspect of this journey was *Agent Orange Roundup: Living With a Foot in Two Worlds* (2020), a book co-written with fellow Marine Lieutenant Sandy Scull. “Cracks and Patches,” by Paul Wisniewski and Aaron Baer, uses a final conversation with his estranged daughter to show that even though Agent Orange has taken his life there is still hope for reconciliation: “After all these lonely years,/Cancer did what I couldn’t do./It built a bridge that spans between us/And it brought me back to you.”



The most ambitious song, “Seeds of Peace,” is by Warrior Songs founder Jason Moon, who participated in Vietnam vet Chuck Theusch’s Children’s Library International 20-year anniversary trip to Vietnam. The song is about the importance of reconciliation work in healing moral injury. The recording is Warrior Songs’ first multi-national effort. Son Mach, conductor of The United Saigon Orchestra, completed recordings in Saigon and Da Nang. Vietnamese school children sang the lead vocals. The song was finished in Madison, Wisconsin with traditional American instruments and a local student choir. “Seeds of Peace” was inspired by Moon witnessing a meal in Duc Pho shared by Theusch and other U.S. Vietnam war veterans with former Viet Cong. The two groups had fought against each other

50 years ago in that province. In fact, during the meal at the school where Theusch built a library Theusch pointed to a hill "over there," where during the war the two "enemies" fought and killed each other. Now they are building libraries. Moon wrote the song while riding a bus in Viet Nam, thinking about the meal he witnessed and the children who benefit from the libraries.

The new CD not only brings forth the experiences of women and vets of color but is also international in scope. Pauline Pisano composed "Orange Lipstick and Pink Uniform Taxes" from the testimony of women vets. In "Welcome to the World," Parthon explored the experience of African-American vet Calvin Wade, who faced racism after returning from war. Actor, writer, and producer Elvis Thao created a song about the experience of Hmong veteran Chai Cher Vue entitled "Bloody Mekong."

Warrior Songs was founded in 2011 by Iraq War veteran Jason Moon, who, diagnosed with PTSD, attempted suicide. He began to write songs about his experiences, and in 2010 released the CD *Trying to Find My Way Home*. This led to performances at educational sessions for non-vets and veterans' retreats, which in turn led to vets sharing their stories with him. He realized that music could be an agency of healing for others if he could transform the stories into songs with the help of professional musicians and songwriters. He founded Warrior Songs in 2011, and the first CD, *If You Have to Ask . . .*, with Moon as executive producer, was released in 2016. The CD *Women at War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2* was released in 2018 and represents the first time in the history of modern music that a full length CD was created from the testimony of women veterans. Eighteen women veterans and two Gold Star family members supplied testimony. 17 songwriters and 64 professional musicians brought the songs to life. 13 engineers, working in recording studios across five states, created the final recordings. In total, "Warrior Songs Vol. 2: Women at War" was

produced by the collaboration of 95 people, of whom 49 were women. *Women at War* won the Wisconsin Area Music Award Album of the Year for 2019.

Moon has long-range plans for Warrior Songs. Volume 4 featuring songs by veterans of color is scheduled for a 2023 release. Future themes are "Family, Friends, and Support," "Native and Indigenous Voices," "Injured and Disabled Veterans," "Rainbow Warriors/LGBTQ ," "Tales from the Combat Zone," and "Women Veterans of Color." By 2030 he hopes to release volumes 1 through 10 as a full box set. A supplementary 11th volume will explore the experiences of survivors of US wars.

The new CD, as well as volumes 1 and 2, are free for veterans and are available from Warriorsongs.org. A preview of the CD can found at: www.warriorsongs.org/WSV3

The following are some of the contributors' notes on songs found on the album.

"Conscription"

Neil O'Connor: John Zutz wrote the poem "Conscription" about his experience with the Viet Nam draft lottery. He and Lisa (Johnson) then collaborated on writing it as a song, with Lisa creating the music. Lisa and I were acquainted through both musical and non-musical interests, and she asked me whether Vets on Frets would be interested in recording the song for the upcoming Warrior Songs III CD. We were, and we started on the project in December 2017.

Lisa provided a copy of the lyrics and a basic recording of the song. I shared it originally with Vets on Frets members Danny Proud and Mark Loder, since the three of us were the only members with access to digital/virtual recording equipment. Danny, an experienced songwriter, revised some of the lyrics, and we rehearsed the parts separately until we could set up a virtual server; that server (Jamulus) allowed

us to rehearse the song together in real time. We then cut our separate instrumental and vocal tracks in our homes, which Mark mixed on his mixing equipment. We needed a 3rd voice on the verses, so we recruited Rick Larson, one of the original Vo F members; we also asked Lisa to sing on the refrains. All the tracks were sent to Paradyme Studios in Madison, WI, where Jake Johnson fine-tuned the instrumentals, and Rick, Danny, Lisa and myself recorded the final vocal tracks in April. We sent the finished song to Jason, and it will be on the CD.

I'm also old enough to have been subject to that draft lottery in 1971, so John's description of the lottery experience was very real for me (I was 52 when I served in Iraq; that's a whole 'nother story). The song very accurately communicates the uncertainty and foreboding of the times; it felt like life was on hold until you got that lottery number. I'm of the Viet Nam veteran generation, so I've always felt connected to their experiences, especially with the music of the time. My Iraq experience felt like it had some parallels with the Viet Nam vet experience, though our treatment upon returning home was infinitely more positive.

Vets on Frets came about when Danny and Mark, both Guitars for Vets instructors at the time, invited three of the recent graduates to informal jam sessions to encourage their continued growth as guitarists. They chose to have these sessions at the Madison Vet Center where I worked as a clinical social worker; the sessions were held on the one evening a week I staffed the Center. Rick Larson (Navy-Viet Nam), and brothers Jim (Army-Viet Nam) and Joe (Army-Europe) Ballweg formed the origin of the group. After a year, Danny and Mark challenged them to perform together in public at a Guitars for Vets fundraiser in a local venue. That was a real success, and they continued with that annual event for several years. About six years ago, they asked me to join them, since I played 12-string guitar and they wanted an additional voice in the group. We expanded to play at a number of local venues,

and any donations/monies we earned went to local vets' organizations (which continues to this day). Three years ago Thomas Hopfensberger (Air Force-US) joined us on guitar and vocals. COVID saw us on hiatus for 18 months, and we've just restarted performing in public again. We also recorded a song about the pandemic, co-written by Rick and Danny, titled "Swept Away"; it's been played on a couple of local community run radio stations, and been submitted to our local public radio station for an airing.

John Zutz: I was born in 1949 and served U.S. Army April 69 – April 71, Vietnam 1970. I drove a dump truck and covered the central third of South Vietnam pretty well. I was assigned by Jason Moon to write a song about the draft. I'm not a musician so he asked Lisa Johnson to work with me. I began working on the words, the message. Later Lisa provided the tune. Due to COVID distancing we worked separately with only one or two direct contacts over the computer. Vets on Frets came later, and made a few changes. So the song is the work of a committee that never met. I'm amazed at how well it turned out. The band communicates the feelings of loneliness and loss, the pressures we were under at the time.

Lisa Johnson: John and I conferred via Zoom a couple times, and he gave me some more background on his experience as well as emailing me a copy of the poem the song was to be based on. I am a board member of Warrior Songs and Jason had asked me to work with John to develop the song (I had previously done a song on the volume 2 CD with stories from women veterans). I hardly feel like I should take any credit for this one; it is a lot of John's verbiage (and Vets on Frets added some great lines and context as well). I just put it in a kind of sequential order that rhymed, gave it a chorus and came up with a melody. I just wanted it to be as true to his experience and poem as I could. I sang/played the song over Zoom for John. It is critically important when Warrior Songs does a story-to-song project like this that the veteran whose

story it is agrees that the song reflects the feeling and experience he/she had. John suggested a few changes that VOF was able to work in at the studio, and we were good to go. I had the idea that because each verse was about a different facet of the conscription process that it would be nice if different people sang each verse, and if they were veterans themselves, so much the better. Vets on Frets immediately came to mind. I knew of Neil through a concert VOF did at a local folk music cooperative, the Wild Hog in the Woods Coffeehouse where I volunteer and because his wife took my master gardener volunteer training course. As it was during the pandemic and we couldn't meet in person to have me play and record the song, Neil was very helpful (and patient!!) in helping get me set up with Jamulus software and a set of recording headphones so that I could play/record the song for him online. This took a couple weeks since I had to order various pieces of equipment, download Jamulus, and have Neil walk me through setting it all up, with various technology-related snafus along the way. Once recorded, VOF members listened to it and took it from there. They added a couple important phrases including John's suggestions and gave it their special sound. I even got to sing on the chorus when we finally did get to go to the studio! I am grateful to have had the opportunity to meet/work with everyone!

"Seawolf 7-6"

Kyle Rightley: I met Jason Moon several years ago at a folk music event called Wild Hog in the Woods when I was first doing solo acoustic music. We hit it off, and pretty soon we were getting together regularly to write songs. He mentioned his vision for the Warrior Songs project, and I was interested in participating as a songwriter, even though I'm not a veteran. That eventually led to the song "Brothers" on the first compilation disc. "Seawolf 7-6" is the story of Bill Martin. He piloted a gunship in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam conflict, but he was also an amateur magician who

would perform for children in the local villages during his downtime. Jason Moon put me in touch with Bill, and I interviewed him over the phone and by email since he lives in New Mexico and I'm in Wisconsin. Bill has lived a very full and colorful life, and really my challenge was picking the most interesting stories to focus on for this song. I would write some initial lyrics and musical ideas, and Bill would give me feedback about what was working and what wasn't. Eventually, the song came into focus. Working on these Warrior Songs projects has taught me the power of narrative in a song. The process of telling someone else's story through music makes me look at my own music through a different lens. Even if I'm not telling a literal story, I try to make any new song have an emotional arc with a beginning, middle, and end.

Bill Martin: I met Jason Moon at Winterfest in Angel Fire. He was performing and my group <vetsandpats.org> followed him. He wanted to include a song about me in Album 3 of Warrior Songs. His particular interest was that I performed magic shows in the villages between fire fights. I flew helicopter gunships in Vietnam with the famed Seawolf Squadron. Flew over 500 missions and popped into the villages in my sector more than 50 times. I would set up and do a show while my gunners walked around making friends and gaining trust. Occasionally I would fly to my maintenance base for repairs. There was an orphanage with 200 orphan girls next to the base. I loved doing magic for them. I was slightly involved in their rescue from the clutches of the Vietcong during the fierce fighting of the Tet Offensive. My knowledge of trick escapes saved me from capture when two Vietcong tied me up on a jungle trail while I was performing in several villages during the Children's National Holiday. My unit was made up of all volunteers. We were there to provide close air support for the River Patrol Boats (PBRs). My call sign was Seawolf 7-6. Most of my scrambles were called by Dick Godbehere. He was a boat captain leading from two to six boats on patrols and special ops. His call sign was Handlash Delta. He was the bravest sailor I have ever

met. He took the fight to the enemy and never backed down. He would carry the flag into narrow canals, expecting to get ambushed, but knowing that the Seawolves would be there when scrambled. Dick had one boat shot out from under him. He and his crew were seriously wounded on their last mission, and medevaced to the States. Because of our close interaction under extreme situations, we have maintained contact, Dick became the Sheriff of Maricopa County. He is now a high-end home builder in Hawaii and elsewhere. I think that Kyle did a wonderful job on the music. I asked if we couldn't put more of the combat into it, but Jason was more interested in the magic. I can understand that, since it is a bit unusual and has human interest. Nightmares followed me for many years. But the memories of the kids laughing keep me on track. I am honored just to be included in volume 3.

"Look Out Sam"

Jake Froelke: In terms of the collaboration with Doug, we had some phone calls and I read his book. I took ideas from our conversations and the book and put a song together. "Look Out Sam" refers to "Uncle Sam", our nickname for the government and its relationship to the military and the men and women who put their life on the line for them. It was another dark time in our country's history. I wasn't born yet but it was my parents, and aunts and uncles, generation. I've met and talked with quite a few people in that age group. This is the first time I took a specific subject and did research in order to create a song. Usually my songs come in other ways and are more personal. The point of view through different eyes made for a stretch in my songwriting. It's good to get out of the comfort zone once in a while. This was a different approach, an interesting take on the songwriting process.

Doug Bradley: All credit goes to brother Moon for organizing this collection (and his earlier two). We wouldn't be having this conversation if he wasn't working his magic. That said, he connected me and Jake. We had a brief chat, I

told Jake to read *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (which he did), and then we drilled down a bit on what my Vietnam was like in the rear in 1970-71. As I told him more than once, music, lots and lots of music. Jake went off and did his thing, then sent me a demo. I gave him some minor (key) feedback and he wrapped it up. I believe Sam is Uncle Sam but maybe Jake has a different take?

“Disquieted Mind”

Jeff Mitchell: I’ve known Jason Moon for years from our overlapping time in the Oshkosh, WI folk music community and our many mutual friends. I’ve followed Jason’s work with Warrior Songs since its beginnings. I was looking for a few things from my experience, including an opportunity to be of service, to explore my personal thoughts and assumptions on war and those involved, and also for a spur to creativity as I’d been in a songwriting slump. So, I filled out the volunteer application and (happily) was accepted.

The collaborative process with Steve Gunn started with reading assignments (chief among them *War and the Soul* by Dr. Ed Tick) followed by a long initial telephone conversation. Steve was very generous in sharing his experiences of the war in Vietnam and his subsequent path to healing from what many mental health professionals now refer to as “moral injury.” After this call, I began my writing process, which occurred mostly during a series of hikes near my home in Milwaukee. Over the course of developing the song, Steve and I would check in and he kindly answered my follow-up questions and provided important guidance on the lyrics and the feeling of the recording. It is of utmost importance that the song should reflect the thoughts and lived experience of the veteran directing the project. I hope that I have at least somewhat approached that goal.

Steve’s healing process involved reaching out to those around him and offering his resources and talents in service of

others. It seemed that the choral approach would reflect the importance of connection and community in the path towards healing and reconciliation. On a personal note, this song was created during the isolation of COVID-19. Pulling in collaborators was a wonderful way to connect with many of the dear friends I've made over the years of making music.

Previously, I have often centered my songwriting on my own experiences and emotions. While this song was still created through my personal process, the explicit goal was to share Steve's story and valuable insights which may help others in their own struggles with moral injury. I can't help but think this has expanded and deepened my creative process. I guess that remains to be seen! My main hope is that Steve's honesty and generosity of spirit will bring some aid and comfort to at least a few of his fellow veterans.

Steve Gunn: I served as a conscientious objector combat medic with the 101st Airborne Division. I served with Delta Company, 2/506th, in the last major campaign of the Vietnam War, the battle for Fire Support Base Ripcord. My recovery from PTSI and Moral Injury involves daily meditation, service to my international meditation organization, the Self Realization Fellowship, playing music (guitar and vocal), serving with a Veteran/Community listening circle, and mentoring people recovering from addiction. I travelled to Vietnam twice with Ed Tick and a group of veterans and engaged in philanthropic projects there as a part of my recovery from Moral Injury. As a part of recovery from Moral Injury and service to fellow veterans, I gave a TEDx talk on the subject. I am a retired social worker psychologist and personal coach. Prior to retirement, I worked for 40 years in children's behavioral health services as a therapist and administrator. I said yes when Jason Moon asked me if I was interested having a songwriter write a song about my experience. He assigned Jeff Mitchell to me and we began collaborating. Jeff and I conversed on the phone and I sent him photos, poems, [my TEDx](#)

[talk](#) and he wrote the song based on that resource information. The major themes of the song are moral Injury and recovery.

“Face Down”

This contributor wishes to remain anonymous.

I am the Marine responsible for “Face Down.”

It’s the story of a young man who trained diligently for war and a Marine Recon team by foregoing dates and fun in high school and training by running from my home out to the prairies, doing countless pushups, sit ups, and studying metaphysical writings to prepare mentally. I then moved to Colorado after graduating and climbed 14,000 ft. mountains on my days off from working on a ranch in the Collegiate Range.

Then I joined the Marines and went through all the training and into Marine Recon school at Camp Horno. I also went through sniper school and worked with the ideas of the spiritual qualities of precision and accuracy rather than killing.

We were subjected to the brainwashing of objectifying ourselves and the enemy. We were asked to pray to kill and to scream “kill” over every obstacle. I reversed the objectification with the spiritual reality that I could not kill the spiritual essence of anyone.

When I arrived at my combat team I was sodomized in the dark under the guise of initiation. I had no idea of what was coming until it was over. Then I had to physically fight them all. That whole team went out and they were all killed.

I still had thirty long range missions to run to find and interdict enemy infiltration coming off the Ho Chi Minh trail out of Laos and into South Vietnam. At times I had to use my weapons to protect my team but for the most part I prayed for

the enemy and our team so as not to ramp up the killing and for everyone's protection. I did not accept the objectification that I was taught as I saw the enemy as real people and not "Gooks." I felt much remorse when killing took place and I vowed that I would not go through life as a Marine but as a conscious Being. It's not fair how 18 year old kids were indoctrinated into war and hatred. It doesn't just go away and then we have to work on it for a life time. Refusing to hate and oppress . . . supporting the interconnectedness of us all and all life forms . . . being as gentle and gracious as we can be with ourselves and all others. It's a privilege to be on this plane of existence and only Love can take us where we need to go. This is not a criticism of individual Marines at all. It is an explanation of the brutality of war and what it does to our young people.

"Cracks and Patches"

Paul Wisnewski: Jason Moon sent me a handful of writings by Vietnam veteran Brenton MacKinnon. The instructions were to write a song about Agent Orange. MacKinnon's writings were jarring to read and were primarily about Vietnam and its effects. However, it was a few paragraphs about his evolving relationship with his daughter that really stuck in my mind. I thought this relationship could be used to express his story in a way that non-veterans could more easily understand.

Mackinnon had the following line in one of his writings:

"Cracks and patches in the ceiling plaster floated and danced above me in beautiful patterns sketching a map of my long journey from Los Angeles to Nong Son."

The words "cracks and patches" grabbed my attention as a description of his life and relationship with his daughter. I think it also accurately describes most of our lives and relationships, so I wanted to use it as the basis of the song as well as the title.

My collaborator is Aaron Baer. Apparently I don't get very far in my phonebook when looking for help . . . hahaha.

"The Last Thing We Ever Do"

Jason Moon: Anyone who came home who had PTSD knows something. These guys are home maybe 40, 50 years and they have some wisdom. The goal for the CD was to get that wisdom about how to live before they passed. The focus was to capture that wisdom and the different ways they processed their experiences. It's like leaving a road map for the younger generation.

The songs are personal and express first-hand testimony. The songs are really about truth-telling. Vets are not a monolithic group. There is diversity among vets and we tried to show that. Originally the CD was planned as a double album because of so many vets we wanted to honor and to show that diversity, but COVID put a stop to that.

It was important to have an international dimension, like in "Seeds of Peace," to show the reconciliation efforts. In Wisconsin, probably as elsewhere, there is a lot of ignorance and racism about the Hmong. I'm not sure many people even know about the sacrifices the Hmong made. It was important to have Elvis Thao's song, "Bloody Mekong," as a voice for them. I wanted that story.