

Painting Away the Trauma

Combat veterans use art as a way to manage post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and restore balance in their lives, helping them 'get back into the world'

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In the aftermath of experiencing war, some VFW members have returned to their previous passion — art — to manage post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and bring hope to others.

VFW Life member Pete Damon is one of them. He was in Iraq for only a few weeks when everything changed.

On Oct. 21, 2003, Damon, who served with the Army's 3rd Assault Bn., 158th Aviation Regt., was working on the wheel of a helicopter at Balad Air Base when the rim “exploded.” The blast severed Damon's arms and killed Spc. Paul J. Beuche, 19, of Daphne, Ala.

“I don't remember much,” Damon said. “It was just flashes of horror of realizing my arms were gone.”

Damon lost his right arm above the elbow and left arm below the elbow. He spent 15 months at Walter Reed Army Medical Center — three as an inpatient and 12 as an outpatient. In the following weeks, he underwent “multiple surgeries.”

“I was pretty optimistic, I guess — as far as you can be in that situation,” said Damon, a member of VFW Post 697 in Middleboro, Mass.

It was at Walter Reed, after transitioning to outpatient status, that Damon regained his appreciation for art — something he used “to ward off homesickness” while in Iraq and Kuwait (June 2003). He started re-learning how to write with his non-dominant hand and an idea emerged.

“The thought just occurred to me sort of like a light bulb going off in your head — if I could

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draw simple shapes to make up letters, I could also draw pictures,” Damon said. “For some reason, this was a big spiritual boost to me.”

‘BRUSH WITH DEATH’

Damon said he started having panic attacks about one year after the incident, not knowing that he was experiencing PTSD symptoms. He was diagnosed in 2014.

“I felt that saying I had, or being diagnosed with, PTSD would be something that only someone going through something much more stressful like combat [would experience],” Damon said. “But I’ve come to realize that any trauma can cause PTSD. So painting helps me deal with that a lot.”

Damon also opened True Grit Art Gallery in Middleborough, Mass., in 2015.

“[Running the gallery helps] keep my mind pristine, occupied and healthy,” Damon said.

Before being injured, Damon said, he viewed drawing as a “novelty.” But his outlook has changed.

“I guess having a brush with death kind of wakes you up in a lot of ways [and] makes you focus on different things in life,” Damon said. “You get a different way of looking at life, and focusing on important things, and art helps me to do that.”

He said he is inspired by “simple American scenes,” architectural subjects and how “light affects objects or the world around us.”

“I paint by inspiration,” Damon said. “These are just little dramas in the universe that affect me in some way.”

Because he cannot grip utensils as he did before his injury, Damon said it takes a “little finesse” to paint.

But he developed his own style to accommodate his prosthetics.

“[My style has] sort of evolved because of my limitations,” Damon said. “If you look at my paintings, there are a lot of broken lines because I don’t have a lot of force in my brush strokes. It’s sort of a light touch.”

GROUND ZERO ‘WORSE THAN ANYTHING’

Another veteran, Dave Rogers, commander of VFW Post 2913 in Patchogue, N.Y., initially planned to study forensic psychology and join the FBI. But a broken neck put him on a different path.

Rogers, also a first responder with the 1st Bn., 69th Infantry (New York Army National Guard) at the World Trade Center after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack, said he learned to “turn things off” while serving in the Army. But his experience at Ground Zero “opened all the flood gates.”

“It was worse than anything I’ve ever experienced,” said Rogers, who served in the Army’s 224th Military Intelligence Bn., 24th Infantry Division, (Hunter Army Airfield) in Iraq (1990-91) and Headquarters Co., V Corps in Bosnia (1997) as an infantryman and utility supply specialist.

‘STRUGGLE EVERY DAY’

On Sept. 13, 2001, at Ground Zero, he was involved with search and rescue operations when the front of Building 7 started to fall.

“I was helping people get out when I was knocked over and hit my neck and head,” Rogers said. “I then had to jump on a boat by the dock to get out of the area until all was clear. The jump was about 10 feet down, and I hit my back in the landing.”

From there, Rogers said, “everything went to mush, basically.” With help from a therapist, he rediscovered his passion for art. Being an artist has helped him release frustrations and “get back into the world.”

“When I got out, I was lost for a while,” said Rogers, who was medically discharged from the Army in 2005. “I didn’t know what I was going to do with my life. Art basically brought me back.”

He was working in China as an English and art professor with WuYi University in Jiangmen, where he had his first art show. Since then, Rogers’ work has been seen in 11 countries.

“I still struggle every day,” said Rogers, who was diagnosed with PTSD in 2007, “but going to the shows — like when they’re my shows and I know I have to go — has basically forced me to come out of my shell. I would say my art is kind of like my service dog...It forces me to get out in the world.”

Rogers said one of the “great” aspects of art is that it’s a vehicle for “releasing a story” — whether or not those viewing the final piece fully understand what it’s about.

“If I paint the World Trade Center, obviously [people know I’m] talking about the World Trade Center,” Rogers said, “but I can do paintings that relate to me and my life, and people may not understand that I’m talking about my PTSD or my struggle. But to me I am.”

VETERANS ‘OPEN UP’ THROUGH ART

In rekindling his own passion, Rogers gained a desire to create an art program for veterans,

which he did in 2012. Classes are held four to five times per year either at the Post itself, or Long Island University (LIU), where Rogers earned a master's degree in fine arts.

The workshops draw about a dozen veterans, according to Rogers, who range from the Vietnam and Korean wars to Iraq, Afghanistan and Gulf wars. LIU professors and art therapy students volunteer to teach the workshops. Classes also are offered to veteran family members.

"[One veteran has] really opened up a lot because he's in a setting with other veterans," Rogers said. "The art therapy students are so helpful. The professors are very understanding and helpful. He now feels comfortable."

'PAINT WHAT I FEEL'

And while that's exactly what Rogers aimed for, his mission is two-fold — he also hopes to attract the next generation of veterans.

"A lot of the younger veterans are really looking for new avenues and new things to do," Rogers said. "The traditional fundraisers that we did many years ago, they're still good, but they're not everything. You've got to look for other ways to reach people."

Serving in the Army has allowed Rogers to view his art from a different perspective.

"I used to paint what I saw," Rogers said. "Now I more paint what I feel."

He allows the colors he puts on the canvas to represent his emotions.

"I've learned that certain colors represent part of who I am," Rogers said. "When I use a lot of red in a painting, I'm talking about my anger."

Additionally, the authors of "Art Therapy for Combat-Related PTSD: Recommendations for Research and Practice" state that art therapists have reported "remarkable results" in their work with combat veterans.

Kate Collie and David Spiegel, of Stanford University; Amy Backos, of the San Francisco VA Medical Center; and Cathy Malchiodi, of the American Art Therapy Association, note that previous research has found that art therapy "provided pleasurable distraction in conjunction with exposure to difficult content and thus allowed traumatic material to be processed without the negative short-term side effects of verbal introspective interventions."

As a self-proclaimed "old-school artist," Rogers said he makes his own paint. That, and his artwork in welding and sculpting, provides what he calls a "physical-ness," that improves his mental health.

“It’s kind of like veterans who go running because running will not just clear their head, but it kind of breaks you down a little bit,” Rogers said. “And you feel better after running because you’ve gotten that energy that was building up inside of you out. And the same thing with art.”

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