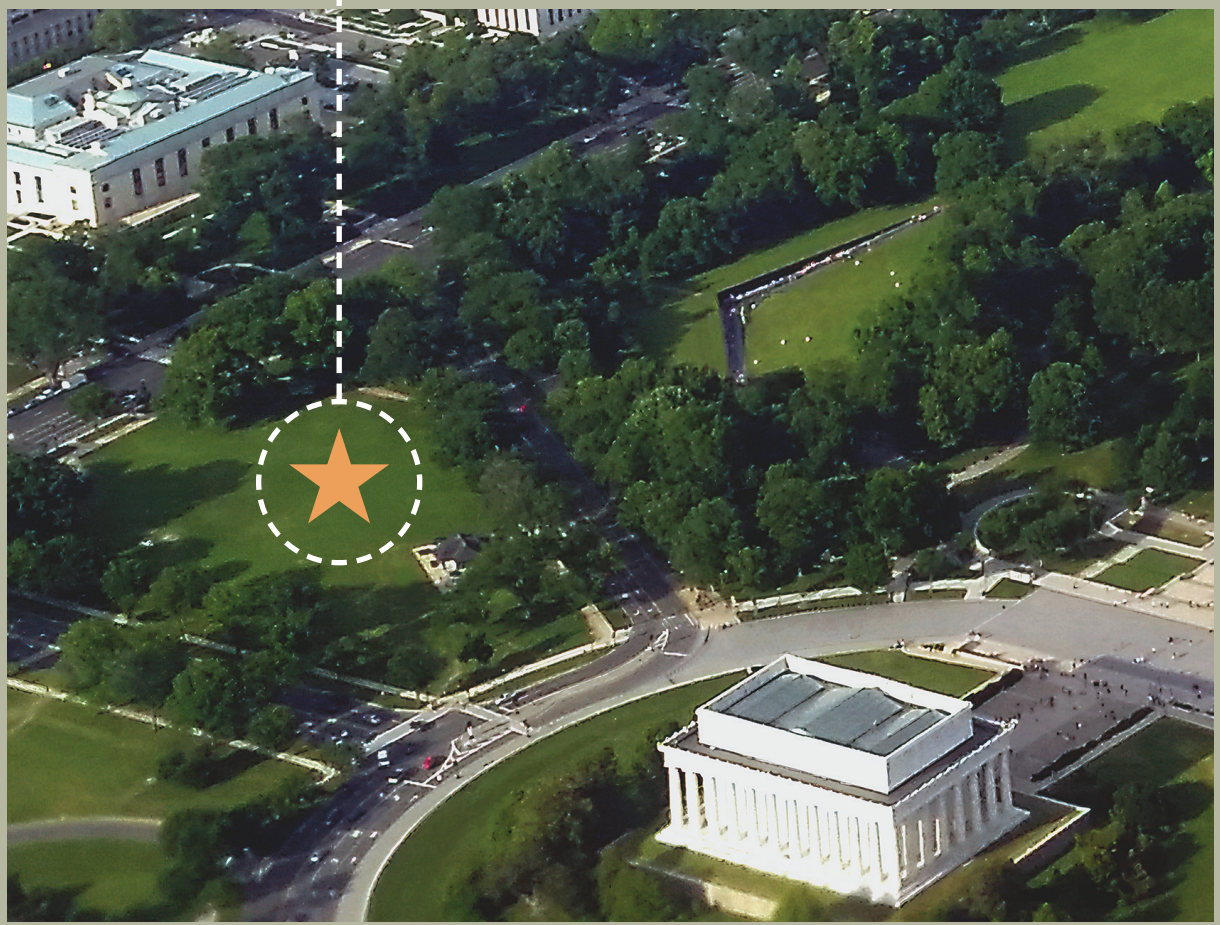
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VBCMagazine

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THE GWOT MEMORIAL

HOW SHOULD WE REMEMBER WAR?



IN THIS ISSUE

DESIGNING THE GWOT MEMORIAL • LEAVING AFGHANISTAN
A WWII GUNNER'S ROMANIAN MISSION • FROM SOLDIER TO ARTIST



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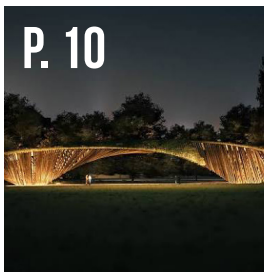
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Todd DePastino, Executive Editor
Daria Sommers, Managing Editor
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Alison Kennedy, Cover Design

Cover image: The star marks the spot on the Reserve section of National Mall in Washington, DC where the GWOT Memorial will be built. That location is at the corner of 23rd Street NW, Constitution Avenue NW and Henry Bacon Drive NW, near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and steps from the Lincoln Memorial. Aerial photo from iStock.

VBC Magazine is published quarterly by The Veterans Breakfast Club, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that harnesses the power of storytelling in order to connect, educate, heal, and inspire.

200 Magnolia Place, Pittsburgh, PA 15228
(412) 623-9029
veteransbreakfastclub.org
For more information, contact
betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org

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FROM THE DIRECTOR



This issue of *VBC Magazine* made me think hard about war memorials, and what we expect from them.

We want them to honor service, acknowledge sacrifice, explain history, console the grieving, and preserve memory for generations yet unborn. That's an awful lot to ask of bronze and granite.

In the pages that follow, we take a look at how Americans have memorialized their wars over the past 250 years and also hear from Army veteran Jennifer Ballou about the effort to design a national memorial to the wars that followed September 11, 2001.

Mahnaz Akbari, who commanded an Afghan Army Female Tactical Platoon that worked alongside American forces, also gives her account of the fall of Kabul in August 2021. How can a monument ever capture her experience, much less the millions of other stories that make up a war? No book, museum, or Veterans Breakfast Club gathering can ever do these stories justice.

And yet, we still try. Memorials give us places to remember, and history gives us a way to understand. Personal stories make that history real, apart from textbooks and headlines and monuments.

At the Veterans Breakfast Club, we can't tell the whole story of any war. We can only listen to those who lived through it, and pass those stories along. And, perhaps, that's enough.

Todd

Todd DePastino, Executive Director
(412) 623-9029
todd@veteransbreakfastclub.org















UPCOMING IN-PERSON PROGRAMS

Our VBC in-person events feature veterans of all eras, backgrounds, and branches sharing memories of service. All in-person events begin at 8:30am and include breakfast, unless otherwise noted. Also, **all VBC breakfasts are now free of charge** (unless otherwise noted) for anyone who would like to attend. However, we do request you make a reservation so we can prepare the space and meal. Please RSVP to betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org or 412-623-9029.

We request RSVPs for all events. RSVP to betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org or 412-623-9029.

Events added often. Check veteransbreakfastclub.org/events for updates.

TUESDAY, November 3, 8:30-10:30am: Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

SATURDAY, November 7, 8:30-10:30am: University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg (The Hempfield Room, Chambers Hall, Greensburg, PA 15601)

MONDAY, November 9, 1:00-3:00pm: Jewish Community Center of Youngstown (505 Gypsy Lane, Youngstown, Ohio 44504)

WEDNESDAY, November 11, 8:00-10:00am: Duquesne University Student Union Ballroom (1243-1219 Locust St, Pittsburgh, PA 15282) $20pp. Register here.

WEDNESDAY, November 11, 6:00-8:30pm: Saints John & Paul Church (2586 Wexford Bayne Road Sewickley, PA 15143)

SATURDAY, November 14, 8:30-10:30am: Sheraton Valley Forge (480 N Gulph Rd, King of Prussia, PA 19406)

FRIDAY, November 20, 8:30-10:30am: Sechler Law Firm's Event Center (500 Commonwealth Drive, Warrendale, PA 15087)

SATURDAY, November 21, 8:30-10:30am: Operation Troop Appreciation (2017 Pennsylvania Ave, West Mifflin, PA 15122)

WEDNESDAY, December 2, 8:30-10:30am: Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

WEDNESDAY, December 2 – SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6: VBC World War II Conference, Hyatt House Tampa Downtown (325 N Florida Ave, Tampa, FL 33602)

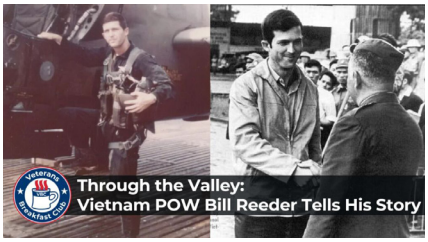
WEDNESDAY, December 9, 8:30-10:30am: Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

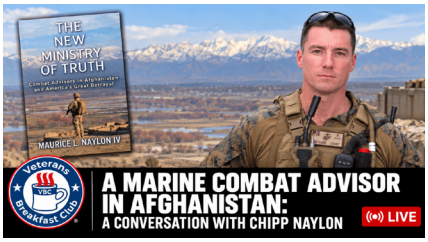
WEDNESDAY, December 16, 11:30am-1:30pm: Jewish Community Center of Youngstown (505 Gypsy Lane, Youngstown, Ohio 44504)

SATURDAY, December 19, 8:30-10:30am: Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

UPCOMING VBC LIVESTREAMS

Mondays and Thursdays at 7pm ET (4pm PT) on Zoom and simulcast to YouTube and Facebook. See schedule and connect at veteransbreakfastclub.org/events.













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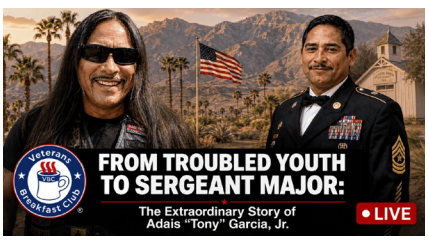
Watch past programs at veteransbreakfastclub.org/past-events/.













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HOW AMERICA MEMORIALIZES WAR

By Todd DePastino

This year saw two landmarks in America's ongoing commemoration of its wars.

On October 24, 2026, thirty-five years after American forces helped drive Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait, the National Desert Shield and Desert Storm Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C. Its purpose is largely educational: to remind future generations of a short war that veterans feared would be forgotten, sandwiched between Vietnam and September 11, 2001.



Rendering of the Desert Shield and Desert Storm Memorial. (Olin Studio)

A short distance away, another memorial is being planned for those who served in the wars that followed 9/11. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Memorial's initial design was unveiled in June.

There is much that separates these two projects, beginning with the wars themselves. One commemorates a brief campaign with a clearly defined objective and a victory that could be announced. The other memorializes a series of conflicts with shifting goals and no clear end in sight.

Yet both face a problem familiar to almost anyone who has tried to build a war memorial. While everyone agrees that wars should be remembered, they debate fiercely how it should be done.

War memorials can do many things, and some of those contradict each other. They can explain a war, celebrate its triumph, grieve its costs, define its purpose, mask its politics, honor those who fought it, even reconcile its enemies.

Whatever their builders intend, war memorials must eventually speak to people who have no memory of the war, nor anyone who served in it.

***

There was a time in our history when we didn't do war memorials. Tell me where you can find a grand national memorial to the American Revolution, the War of 1812, or the Mexican War, for example. There are historic sites, commemorative plaques, and statues erected long after the wars. But no great statement-making monuments honoring the warriors.

That absence was by design. War memorials, in the young republic, were generally frowned upon.

Our Founders didn't believe in giving military men a special, esteemed place in public life. Gratitude was appropriate. But a permanent distinction between those who had borne arms and their fellow citizens was another matter. Wars were something to be endured and learned from, but not glorified.

The Founders knew their Roman history. They knew what happened when soldiers transferred their loyalty from the republic to a commander who promised to reward them. Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon was a warning about the kind of man who could destroy a free government while claiming to save it. Oliver Cromwell supplied a more modern object lesson. Napoleon would soon provide another.

This helps explain why patriotic Americans wept with gratitude when George Washington resigned his commission in 1783. Having won independence, Washington surrendered the power that might have enabled him to rule without anyone's consent. He returned to private life, following the example of the Roman citizen-soldier Cincinnatus, who, according to tradition, declined to become a military dictator and went back to his farm.



The iconic Minuteman statue that stands on the village green in Lexington, MA. Erected in 1899, it honors the local militia that fired the opening shots in the War of Independence. (Oeoi)

In the first decades of the republic, there was no Veterans Day or Memorial Day, no national cemetery system, and little of the public commemoration we now associate with military service.

This neglect was a result, in part, of a skimpy treasury. But it also grew from old republican fears of large standing armies and professional soldiers. Americans hoped their republic would escape the fate of earlier ones by keeping military power small and wars infrequent and uncelebrated.

Instead, Americans placed their hopes in local militias, where every citizen was, in theory, a soldier in waiting. In times of crisis, men would put down their hammers and plows and pick up their rifles. Once the danger passed, they would go home and resume their lives among their neighbors.

Thus, a national system of military remembrance was largely absent in America. There were few statues even to the great Washington himself after his death in 1799, so great the concern over military hero worship.

Military service was an obligation of citizenship. Every citizen a soldier.

***

The Civil War changed all that.

The fighting between 1861 and 1865 delivered death on a scale beyond anything Americans had imagined possible. The familiar estimate of 620,000 military dead has been challenged by research suggesting roughly 750,000. Either figure describes a catastrophe that reached into communities across the country. Oftentimes, families never even learned where their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons were buried.

America's first truly national war memorials were not monuments at all. They were cemeteries.

These cemeteries were born of necessity, but they quickly became hallowed ground, sacred landscapes of national remembrance and honor. At Gettysburg, Antietam, Arlington, and elsewhere, the graves served collectively as a kind of national memorial. The long rows made the magnitude of the loss painfully visible while preserving the identities of those lying beneath, when possible.

Memorial Day grew from this horror. So did military pensions and veteran organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic, which gave former soldiers and sailors a place to remember comrades, support each other, and press their claims upon the nation.

The cemeteries provided a gateway for commemorating military service in public. The nation that had once been suspicious of elevating warriors began filling town squares with soldiers' monuments.

But commemoration immediately raised questions the likes of which have never gone away. Who belongs among the honored dead? Union soldiers but not Confederates? Black soldiers alongside white ones? And what, exactly, was the cause for which they fought? Was it a war to preserve the Union? A war to destroy slavery?

A bronze soldier standing atop a pedestal largely avoided those questions, focusing instead on courage, sacrifice, and duty. Those qualities could be honored without saying a word about what the war itself had meant.



Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington Cemetery. (NurseKimmie77)

From the moment Americans began building war memorials on a large scale, the question was never simply whether to remember. It was what to remember, whom to honor, and what meaning to give their sacrifice.

***

The first truly national war memorial in the United States was the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, dedicated after World War I on November 11, 1921.

Britain and France served as inspiration, when, precisely one year earlier, they coordinated the simultaneous burial of their respective Unknowns under Westminster Abbey and the Arc de Triomphe.

Treating unidentified remains as a sacred national relic was unprecedented. Unknown remains were normally seen as evidence of an embarrassing administrative failure, something to be downplayed. Unknowns were marks of shame for a government that had sent young men to war and not kept track of them, nor even recorded their places and dates of death. In American Civil War cemeteries (where a staggering 42% of the interred were unknown), such casualties received a small square marble block bearing a grave number, instead of the larger upright marble headstone with a name.

Public opinion demanded more. Ordinary citizens, on behalf of grieving families, campaigned to consecrate one anonymous casualty, whose name was known only to God, as a new national symbol. Congress ordered the War Department, which in turn instructed the American Graves Registration Service, to exhume unknown American remains in France and bring them to the United States.

The goal was to find a body about whom nothing was known, not his home state, military unit, or even the battlefield where he fell. That very anonymity would allow him to represent Americans from every part of the country.



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. (Public Domain)

Such exaltation in death had traditionally been reserved for great men: political leaders, generals, explorers, and statesmen. The Unknown Soldier was none of these. Yet, because he had no name, he outranked them all.

***

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier established the national capital as a place of mourning. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, opened in 1982 on the National Mall, transformed the war memorial into an immersive experience in which visitors participate. In so doing, it set off a memorial boom on federal land in Washington, D.C.

Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs and his fellow organizers took an approach opposite of the Tomb: they wanted the names, all the names, of those who never returned from the war. They envisioned a place to grieve fallen comrades without requiring visitors to agree about the war. There would be no political statements, no explanations of American policy, no attempt to justify what had happened.

What that place should look like was another matter. An extraordinary open competition attracted 1,421 proposals. The jury unanimously selected a design submitted by Maya Lin, a 21-year-old Yale undergraduate.

Nothing like it had ever been seen before: two long walls of polished black granite meeting at an angle, one pointing toward the Washington Monument, the other toward the Lincoln Memorial. On the walls would appear the names of the dead and missing, arranged chronologically by the dates they were lost. There would be no statues, no battle scenes, no explanations of what the United States had tried to achieve in Vietnam.

Critics charged that black stone set below ground level and lacking patriotic imagery was an expression of shame. A ferocious political fight nearly derailed the project. A compromise allowed the Wall to proceed, with an American flag and Frederick Hart's bronze sculpture *The Three Servicemen* added nearby. A decade later, Glenna Goodacre's Vietnam Women's Memorial joined them.

It took time for the virtues of Lin's design to become apparent. The descent beneath ground level immersed visitors in the experience rather than setting them apart. You couldn't stand at a distance and look up at a monument. You had to get down in it and read the names. And because the granite was polished, visitors inevitably saw their own reflections among the names of the dead.

The memorial's design favored intimacy and contemplation, encouraging each visitor to have their own private experience.

Then something extraordinary happened. People began leaving things behind: letters, photographs, medals, dog tags, boots, beer cans, toys, birthday cards, and thousands of other objects carrying meanings known only to those who placed them there.

The National Park Service hadn't planned for this and initially didn't know what to do with the offerings. Eventually it began preserving items as a one-of-a-kind museum collection.

Along with the rubbings of names and the touching of the stone, these offerings marked a fundamental shift in the relationship between a war memorial and its audience.

Most memorials tell us what to think and feel: this person was a hero, this war was glorious. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial invites us to talk back, to share our deepest sorrows and most personal reflections.

And it does so without asking visitors to take a stand on the war. Whether you think Vietnam was a noble cause or a terrible mistake doesn't matter there.

The Wall is America's most successful war memorial. Its achievement is not that it settled the meaning of Vietnam. Rather, it created a national place where Americans could encounter the human consequences of the war and begin to heal.

***

The Wall's success inaugurated a new age of memorial building in Washington. Korean War veterans wanted a memorial. World War II veterans wanted one. So did women veterans, disabled veterans, and advocates for countless other groups.

Congress faced a problem. There simply wasn't room for everyone.

The Commemorative Works Act of 1986 established a formal approval process. Later amendments tightened the rules, including a ten-year waiting period after a war's officially designated end before a memorial could be authorized. The idea was to allow some historical distance before committing public space to a permanent interpretation of a war.

The new rules couldn't quell the debates. The Korean War Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1995, was mired in controversy from the beginning. It rejected the Wall's abstraction but incorporated its concept of visitor immersion. Nineteen larger-than-life figures advance across open ground in combat gear. Visitors seem to move with them as they walk through the site.

Veterans demanded that the names of the fallen be added. When they were, in 2022, misspellings, omissions, and the inclusion of some ineligible names generated new controversy. Once a memorial promises to name the dead, it had better name all of them, and name them correctly.



The National World War II Memorial in Washington, DC. (William H. Wade Photography)

The National World War II Memorial, dedicated in 2004, presented a different problem. World War II had never been forgotten. Across America, parks, highways, stadiums, and public buildings already commemorated the war. What hadn't existed in 1945 was the expectation that every major war needed its own memorial in Washington.

Its classical design, with columns, arches, fountains, stars, and wreaths, celebrated victory. Critics found it ponderous and overbearing. Others objected to its location between the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. Congress had to intervene to halt legal challenges.

After that, Congress declared the central part of the National Mall closed to any new memorials.

Organizers of the World War I and Desert Storm memorials had to look elsewhere. World War I ended up in Pershing Park, and Desert Storm just outside the restricted boundary near the Lincoln Memorial. Both emphasize education over remembrance, attempting to explain wars that risk fading from public memory.

***

Then there is the proposed memorial to the wars that followed September 11, 2001.

From the beginning, it required exceptions to the rules. Congress waived the ten-year waiting period because the conflict being commemorated had no official end. Congress also permitted the memorial to be built within the supposedly closed part of the Mall.

The GWOT Memorial's planners have made an extraordinary effort to learn from earlier memorials. As Jennifer Ballou explains elsewhere in this issue, they have sought to involve those being commemorated in the design process from the beginning.

Yet, the unveiling of the initial design sparked inevitable criticism.

And that's probably the most important lesson of America's war memorials: there's no one formula or concept capable of fully memorializing war. Every memorial is born in controversy and must pass through a gauntlet of debate about what, whom, and how we remember.

Something or someone is always left out. Too abstract a design, and the memorial fails to honor a specific experience. Too realistic, and someone will notice the mistakes, flaws, and omissions. If you explain the war, opponents will say you got it wrong. If you leave the explanation out, people will wonder what is being honored.

Perhaps, in the end, we simply ask too much of our war memorials. Perhaps they are made to bear more emotional, spiritual, and historical weight than they can carry.

No memorial can really tell the story of a war. No design can contain the grief, pride, love, gratitude, guilt, rage, horror, and awe that war conjures. No monument can settle what a war means.

But a memorial can give us a place to remember and to honor something ineffable, something both private and public, personal and universal. At a memorial, we dwell, if only for a moment, in the most noble and the most awful of our human experience.

Memorials answer the ancient human need to leave our mark behind and, with it, some assurance that the service and sacrifice of our generation will not be forgotten. ■



Our wish is to respect yours…

We salute the Veterans Breakfast Club as they capture the history of the men and women who served our country.

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DESIGNING THE GWOT MEMORIAL

A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER BALLOU, ARMY VETERAN AND CO-CHAIR OF THE DESIGN ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

By Daria Sommers

Jennifer Ballou is a nonprofit leader and veteran advocate with more than three decades of experience. She served nearly 21 years in the US Army, rising to Senior Enlisted Advisor at the the Army Resilience Directorate and First Sergeant of the 257th Dental Company which was the first Army dental company deployed to Afghanistan. During her 2010 deployment, her husband, SSG Edwardo Loredo, also serving in Afghanistan, was killed in action. She went on to help shape the Army's survivor policy before retiring in 2015.

Jennifer has held leadership roles at the National Veterans Memorial and Museum in Columbus, Ohio and at the GWOT Memorial Foundation. She is the author of the book Own Your Resilience: An Army Leader and War Widow Shares Tools to Live with Courage and Joy *(St. Martin's Press) and is married to CSM (Ret.) Omari Ballou. They have three children.*

The following interview was conducted in early July 2026 and offers readers a look into the collaborative design process for the Global War on Terrorism Memorial.

How did you come to work for the Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation?

When I retired, I knew I still wanted to serve my brothers and sisters and the military-connected community but wasn't sure how or what that would look like.

Then, in March of 2023, Michael "Rod" Rodriguez, the President and CEO of the Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation reached out to share the foundation's progress towards building a national war memorial. At the end of that conversation, he asked me to join as the first Gold Star Fellow to represent and speak on behalf of Gold Star Family members. I was extremely grateful and honored by the opportunity. About a year later, he invited me to be the foundation's chief of staff and I've been serving in this role for about three years or so now.

How do you define the Global War on Terrorism?

The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is the American led global effort to fight terrorism in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001. A lot of people think it was what we did in Iraq or what we did in Afghanistan. It is so much more than that. It includes other conflict zones like Africa and Syria. There are so many operations that fall under the GWOT umbrella. We find ourselves more often than not educating not only the public but even those in uniform on what the GWOT actually is. A lot of people just don't know.

There are still men and women deployed throughout the world



The initial design concept for the GWOT Memorial released on June 10th, 2026. (The GWOT Memorial Foundation)

in support of the GWOT. The war has not ended, and that is another educational piece that we find ourselves having to share. The authorization to use military force – the AUMF – that the Global War on Terrorism falls under is still open and active today. Yes, we left Afghanistan and have a very small footprint in Iraq but the Global War on Terrorism does still continue.

The design process for the GWOT Memorial takes a very different approach from previous memorials. Tell me about that.

Typically, memorials have had a design competition where architects design the memorial or what they think the memorial should look like and then send in their designs and the board picks which one they like.

Our President and CEO's vision was to have the men and women who served and sacrificed so much in the GWOT, and those representing who the memorial will honor, help inspire the design, making it a collaborative process.

What lessons did you learn from previous memorials?

We learned a lot. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a good example. The Wall opened in 1982. But questions were raised about representation for the servicemembers who came home and were still living. In response, they built the statue of the three male soldiers looking at The Wall in 1984. Then the women veterans needed to be represented and so in 1993 they built the Vietnam Women's Memorial. And in 2004 a plaque was installed near the statue of the three male soldiers that honors all those who came home and lost their lives in other ways – to agent orange, suicide, cancer and other service connected causes.

At the GWOT Memorial Foundation, it is our goal to honor all those who served and sacrificed in GWOT from the beginning and we've included representation of all those people on the Design Advisory Council and through our outreach and surveys.

Tell me about the GWOT Memorial's collaborative design process. How was it structured? How was it set up?

In August of 2017, the first legislation was passed that approved the building of the memorial. Rod, our CEO, who was a one-man show back then, thought that the memorial should be built on the Reserve portion of the National Mall but knew that his voice alone was not enough. He also knew that nothing could be built there unless he got another bill passed. So, he started going around the country with printed questionnaires, paper and pen, visiting different groups of people and asking them to fill out the questionnaire. It was a way to start to gather data to confirm or deny that people wanted the memorial built on the Reserve portion of the National Mall.

(Editor's note: The Reserve portion of the National Mall where the GWOT Memorial will be built is located at the corner of 23rd Street NW, Constitution Avenue NW, and Henry Bacon Drive NW, near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and steps from the Lincoln Memorial.)

After the legislation approving the memorial's location was passed in December of 2021, Rod assembled the Design Advisory Council (DAC) which is made up of all of the groups of people the memorial will honor. Gold Star families, uniformed veterans and non-uniformed veterans of the GWOT, including CIA, FBI, USAID and contractors. Men and women who served but didn't wear the uniform. This also includes the military families who supported their loved ones as well as active duty and future servicemembers because the GWOT continues.

Later we made the same survey digital and created our 'Help Design History Campaign.' It was a five minute survey that 20,000 people responded to. Those 20,000 people included veterans dating all the way back to WWII. We also got responses from each branch of the military and all 50 states.

There are two DAC co-chairs. Myself, and Marine veteran and former CIA officer Elliot Ackerman. This work is deeply meaningful to me not only because of my family's personal service and sacrifice but because it is so much bigger than me, my children and my family. This war has affected thousands and thousands of people. This work is an opportunity I don't take lightly and am honored to be part of.

What did you learn from your survey?

The data from that survey revealed that more than half of the people wanted green space, many wanted it to be a gathering place where they could spend time. Another big data point was that respondents wanted it well-lit at night. A large number of people wanted water. Water has a healing element to it.

All of the information from our 'Help Design History Campaign' along with input from our Design Advisory Council (DAC) was presented to the team responsible for designing the physical memorial before they started working on the initial concept. The designers were not allowed to begin designing the memorial until they heard each and every one of the DAC members' stories so they could really understand the impact of this decades-long and still ongoing war.



The Vietnam Women's Memorial, unveiled in 1993. (Public Domain)

Where are you in the design process?

On June 10th of 2026 we shared the initial design concept with the public and invited America to join us on this journey. This was an unprecedented step, as normally this would have just been shared in a National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission meeting for review but it was important to the foundation to have a completely transparent process.

Not only did we unveil the initial design concept, we also explained it and created a follow-up survey so that people could provide input. Next, we are going to take in the feedback and look at common themes in the responses that we have received and decide how the initial concept will shift or change. This will all be done before we begin the final approval process for the design itself.

So, we've always known what we unveiled on June 10th is a first draft. It will likely change. We want to bring the American public along. We are listening. And we want to be as transparent as possible. That is really what we are doing.

(Editor's note: The GWOT Memorial is being designed by the internationally celebrated architect Kengo Kuma and Kengo Kuma & Associates.)

The initial design concept includes footsteps that thread the memorial. They read as a beautiful way to signify the range of those who served. Was that the intent?

Yes. We've gotten early positive feedback on the footsteps concept. I love the word range that you used. Footsteps demonstrate that range and allow you to walk with them again. Visiting the memorial will allow each visitor to experience it in the way that they need and it might be different every single time that they visit.

The footsteps become a powerful way to see the different groups of people. Those who didn't come home, canines, men, women, children who grew up with 9/11 and then went on to serve. They are a way for us to remember everyone.

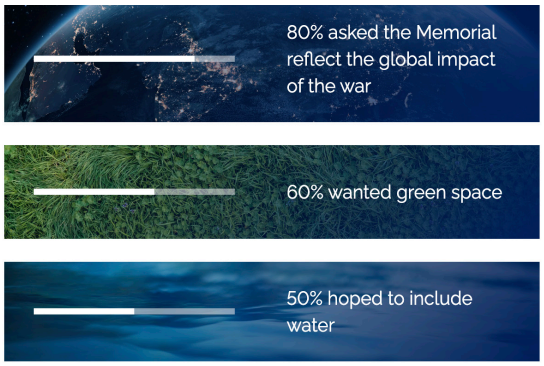
Other elements of the initial concept include the fact that we will be using reclaimed war steel in the memorial in a few different ways including weapons, vehicles and other items. So, in the initial concept, when you look in the pool basin you will see these items. Part of an aircraft that flew you back home, or a weapon similar to the one you used. That is another deeply personal way

that we are creating a connection between those who visit and those who served and sacrificed.

The first iteration of the GWOT Memorial is described as a "ribbon arching over the earth that serves as an embrace." The design is an inverse of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial which sinks into the earth. How does this "ribbon arch" design personalize the memorial for individuals and what is the significance of the direction it faces?

Very early in the process, after the design team had all the stories from the DAC, our CEO and I went to Tokyo. One of the members of our DAC was with us. We were talking about one of the themes from the 'Help Design History Campaign' which was that people wanted a place to come and to gather, a space that would welcome these people home. And the DAC member said, "We hope that when people do come here and we welcome them home that it's like we are wrapping our arms around them. Or giving them a hug." That is an important component of the message this memorial will bring which is not only for the many who bring the war home with them but also for those who die because of what they've carried home with them.

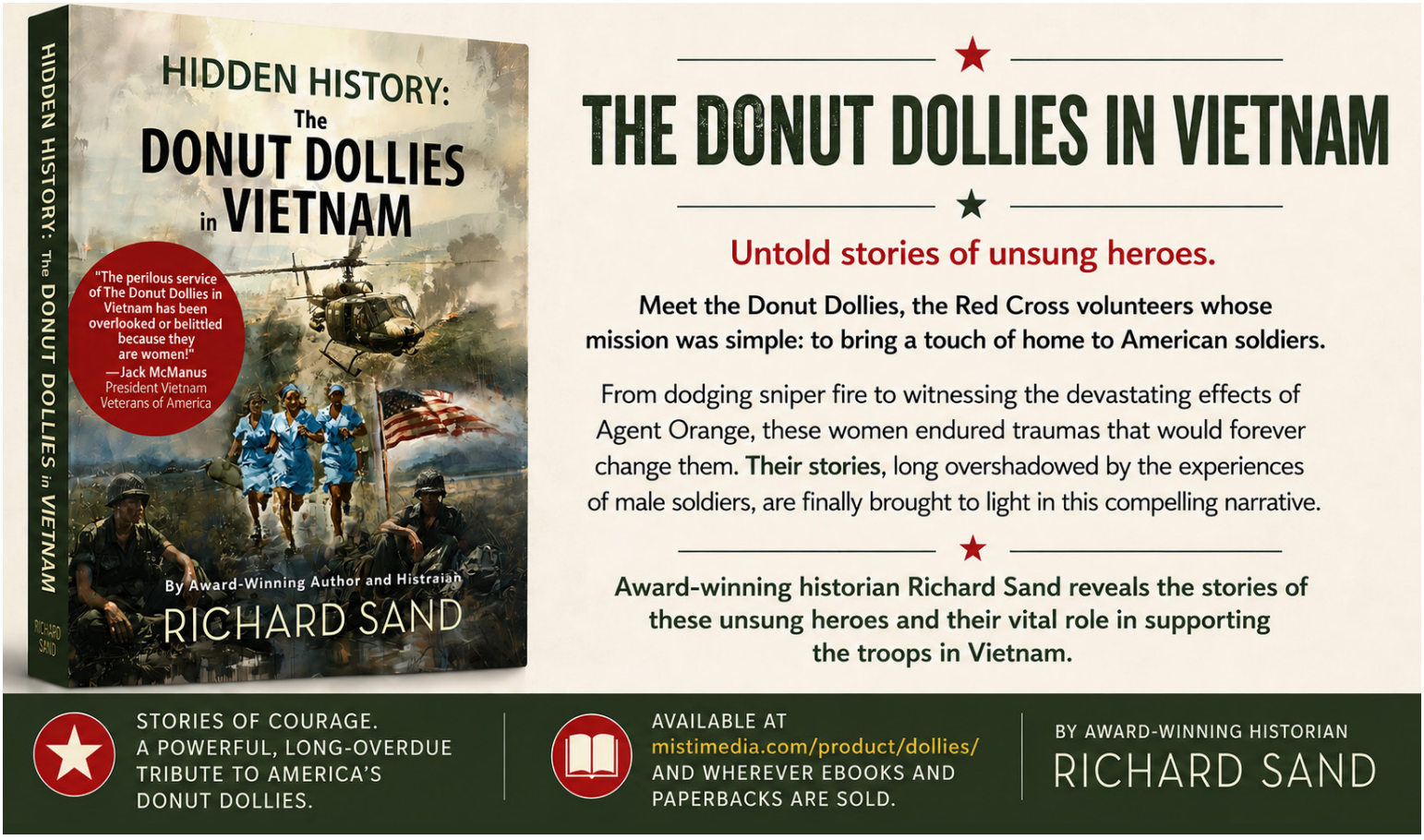
Below the embrace is steel from the war and above is vegetation. This suggests that underneath is the grittiness and that the war that is always there. On top is life. Both need to be supported and remembered.



Design Survey results.
(The GWOT Memorial Foundation)

Currently, the orientation will align with Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, where many of the GWOT fallen have been laid to rest. This positioning will forever link the memorial to that sacred ground. ■

The GWOT Memorial's initial design concept was unveiled on June 10th of this year. On July 13th, after a month of gathering feedback, the public input survey closed. The foundation will be sharing updates on the memorial's evolution this fall. The memorial's projected completion date is 2028. To get the latest news follow the foundation's social media and sign up for emails via www.gwotmemorialfoundation.org.



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LEAVING AFGHANISTAN

THE COMMANDER OF THE AFGHAN ARMY'S FIRST FEMALE TACTICAL PLATOON TELLS HER STORY

By Mahnaz Akbari

In the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Mahnaz Akbari's parents moved to Iran which is where she was born in 1985. In 2011, shortly after she and her family moved back to Afghanistan, she joined the Afghan National Army to fight the Taliban. In 2013, at the age of 28, she was promoted to Commander of the first Female Tactical Platoon (FTP), a position she held until 2019.

During her time as an FTP Commander, she worked closely with American Cultural Support Teams (CST) in support of combat missions executed by Army Rangers, Navy Seals, and US Special Forces. Mahnaz personally supported hundreds of missions and the FTP collectively facilitated thousands more, most of which dealt with intelligence gathering and aiding American forces as they interacted with Afghan women and children during night raids. Amidst the chaos of the American withdrawal, Mahnaz worked tirelessly to help evacuate the women soldiers she'd served with, many of whom had been marked for death by the Taliban, as well as their families. Not all of them made it out.

In 2021, the Afghan Army's Female Tactical Platoon was awarded the John McCain Prize for Leadership in Public Service.

Mahnaz is a member of the Hazara, an ethnic group primarily associated with Afghanistan's central highlands, a region traditionally known as Hazarajat. As Shi'a minority in an overwhelmingly Sunni country, the Hazara have been targeted for persecution by the Taliban and ISIS-K. These attacks intensified once the Taliban regained to power.

As FTP Commander, Mahnaz worked with Rebekah Edmondson, an Army veteran and Cultural Support Team leader who served multiple tours in Afghanistan. After reconnecting in the US, they formed Next Mission, a non-profit focused on supporting Afghan veterans now living in the US. For more information on their work, *see page 17.*

Memory

I remember my mother saying that my grandfather was a tailor in a remote village in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, maybe seventy or eighty years ago. My mother told me that we lived in very difficult conditions at that time. Sometimes we didn't even have food to eat. Sometimes we had to eat salt stone because there was no other food available. But I was a kid and didn't really care about things like that at the time. I thought all over the world is the same. Maybe that was because we didn't have the opportunity as girls to get educated. My mother said there was a bigger world out there.

She told me that her father sewed day and night to earn money. She said they didn't have electricity, and that her father used an oil lamp made from animal fat. It had very little light, but he sewed and sewed until midnight. My mother and her brother happily played in the light.



Mahnaz Akbari and Army veteran Rebekah Edmondson. (Rebekah Edmondson)

Many years later, my grandfather became one of the big owners of land in that area. I don't know if it was all worth it or not because one day it would become the property of the Taliban, who force people to move from their property and they themselves take ownership of that property. How ugly is the face of war that turns my grandfather's property into the domain of a terrorist group.

Afghanistan is a country we deeply love, but today that love is wounded by what is happening there. People are losing their lives because of the cold, lack of food, war and explosions, and because of their ethnicity or religion. And for women, simply being a woman comes with a heavy price.

That's why my colleagues and I fought, some becoming wounded, and some becoming martyrs. It was unbelievable to us, but the Taliban came and turned our country back to a time when the girls weren't allowed to go to school, when girls were used as slaves at home and her job was to provide sexual services to her husband and have babies and cook and clean the house. When the girls had to marry at age of 10, 11 or 12, when the girls were treated as a thing that a husband can use or beat.

The Call to Serve

I was born and grew up in Iran, where I had a safe life: there was no Taliban or terrorist groups, but Iran had so many other problems. Finally, my family decided to return home to Afghanistan.

As an adult, I joined the Afghan Army [in 2011], where I found my identity. We bought a small and beautiful house in the west of Kabul where Hazaras people live, called Dasht Barchi. It's also a place where the Taliban and ISIS have done a lot of suicide attacks, in schools, in hospitals, in maternity wards, in weddings salons, in mosques. I believe the goal in this is to kill Hazara people in an act of genocide.

When I joined the military, I decided to continue my education, so I went to night school to study politics. I had to leave my house at 5:30 in the morning and come back at 9 pm, which was dark in the winter and so dangerous but it was my goal to do that and I did it. I had a lot of bad experiences during those four years of my education: several times people attacked me and beat me but I had to do it.

In 2013, the unit with which I worked (The Ktah Khas, or KKA, Afghanistan's most elite Special Forces military unit) decided to give me a higher position as a major in the military and after that I continued my job as Female Tactical Platoon Commander.

Our team was actually created because of the cultural sensitivities in Afghanistan. During night operations, we often entered homes while searching for Taliban or Al-Qaeda commanders and other members of terrorist groups. Women and children were often present in those homes.



Mahnaz while serving as the FTP Commander, 2018. (Public Domain)

Because of Afghan cultural traditions, male soldiers could not search women or directly interact with them in the same way. Our role as female members of the FTP was to search women and speak with them about the actions of men in the household. The work we did was the same as the work performed by the US Cultural Support Teams. The difference was that we spoke the language and understood the culture. Our CST partners did not, which often created challenges.

It was a really hard job because I had to resolve a lot of cultural conflicts between female and male soldiers during my job, but I loved that my girls, despite challenges, were working in a male-dominated area, very far away from family but they were so strong. By working with male American and Afghan soldiers,



A Female Tactical Platoon soldier watches over a woman and her children, 2012. (Public Domain)

the Afghan women soldiers in my unit were breaking the taboo, breaking the chain.

Those years were my best years, ones where I was achieving my dreams and my goals.

The Fall of Afghanistan

On the night of August 17th, 2021, I was supposed to go inside the Kabul airport. It was like a nightmare for me. I was responsible for getting more than 50 of my colleagues and their families inside the airport with the help of American soldiers. That night I was told to keep the Female Tactical Platoon (FTP) members together. We were around the airport, surrounded by a lot of people from different ethnicities, male, female, children, young, old. It felt like the entire population of Kabul came there and all of them had a goal to run away from their country taken over by the Taliban.

Everyone had bad memories from the Taliban. Nobody wanted to live under their government. It was an awful situation. At the airport, there were a lot of Taliban around, who were beating people with whips and using their weapons to disperse people, but people stayed strong and didn't leave the airport.

It was midnight when my American colleagues called me and told me to bring the members of the FTP next to the gate. The women in my platoon had to grab hands to stay together. When we got closer to the door, the girls dispersed in the crowd. After trying hard, around 30 of us FTPs got into the airport, but because we burned all of our military identity documents (out of fear the Taliban would find them) and the American that was supposed to help us was still at the main gate, we were sent outside the airport again.

It was chaotic, terrifying and miserable. I was freaking out, some of the girls were crying, because they lost their parents and children among the crowd and they didn't want to try again to go inside the airport. I called out to the American guy again and told him what happened. He had me bring the girls back to the gate, but this time it was even harder. The girls completely dispersed. It was dark and it was so hard to find anyone, even sitting on one of the American's shoulders searching with a hand light.



Crowds outside the airport during the Fall of Kabul, 2021. (Sergeant Dalton Hannigan, 2/1 Marines)



Afghans board a USAF C-17 during the evacuation at HKIA August, 2021. (US Central Command)

So many people were asking me to help get them inside the airport, but there was only so much I could do to help. I felt sick. I saw a woman with an Asian face crying and saying, "I am American." But I couldn't do anything for her. Her face stayed with me for a long time. Among that huge crowd, she was the one person I remember crying out, "I am American." For a long time afterward, whenever I closed my eyes, I could still see her face. It was very difficult for me because I wanted to help her, but in that moment, there was nothing I could do.

I saw one FTP among the crowd who couldn't breathe, her eyes were closed and she was just stuck among the crowd. Another soldier and I were able to help her inside the airport, but there were still a lot of FTPs missing, so I went out several more times to try and find them. It was a very bad night.

I spent three nights in the Kabul airport to help FTPs get inside but after three straight days and nights, I was ill, exhausted and injured. It was finally time to evacuate to America.

The Flight Out

Coming from this sort of trauma, it's really hard to build a whole life from scratch. As I described, I was set to leave the Kabul airport in August of 2021, and was guided to a huge cargo airplane, which brought back a lot of memories, because it was the same kind of airplane that during my job in the military I flew to travel to different parts of Afghanistan.

I remember one day that I and Mary, my American colleague, were supposed to go to one of the provinces, and we had to travel with that kind of airplane; I said to Mary that sometimes I was scared to fly with this kind of airplane because they carry very huge stuff and I feel that it is going to fall. Mary comforted me. She smiled and said, "Me too."

But this time was different, I was going to travel but not inside Afghanistan. I was traveling outside of Afghanistan, directly to the United States. This time the airplane wasn't heavy, it was just filled with people. Everyone was quiet, even the children. You could feel fear and sadness in people. I sat between my two nieces, both scared from the situation, and scared for their parents and their siblings' lives, because they remained in Afghanistan. I was between them - they could put their heads on my shoulders, I could calm them but there was nobody to calm me. I was worried for my family, I was worried for my colleagues, I was sad for all things that I had lost, for my country, for my lovely job, for everything that I tried hard to achieve. I don't know how much I cried but I know it was the worst day in my life.

Starting Over

Finally, we made it to the US. The government admitted us with parole status that allowed us to stay for up to two years and to work. I spent two months in the Fort McCoy camp in Wisconsin. There were a lot of people in that camp. Most people didn't have sim cards for their phones. There was a place that had free Wi-Fi, so a lot of people came to that area to call their families back in Afghanistan. I did the same, every day. That place for me was special, because it was the only place that I could connect with my family and with other people also.

I had seen a lot of people crying while talking to their families back home. Some of them lost their family members, and the Taliban went to others' houses and took their family members. I was surrounded by people hearing bad news, and people crying and sighing. It was so unpleasant but I had to go there to talk to my own family. Two months in that camp passed for me like two years. I dreamed every night and my night became morning with nightmares. I was so tired, so broken, so disappointed.

But finally, my nieces and I made it out of the camp. I thought that perhaps outside of camp I would feel better, but it was the same because the situation in Afghanistan was the same. Every day I hear bad news about Afghanistan, about the Taliban, about girls that are not allowed go to school, about the genocide of Hazaras. But I am lucky enough to have some American friends here that are helping me a lot and teaching me the life skills I need here, but it's sometimes hard, because everything is so very different than in Afghanistan.

My Status

On September 23, 2022, I had my interview for asylum in America, a familiar and stressful situation for an Afghan immigrant. My lawyer, a volunteer who represents me pro bono, tried hard to prove that if I return to Afghanistan, I will be in grave danger because of my work in the military with Americans during the past 10 years. I am also at risk as a Hazara female in Afghanistan.

In several meetings I had to explain things about myself that I never even thought about before. My whole life in a few conversations. I had a lot of things to talk about, things in my life that didn't seem important for me at that time but are stories that may change my life, from joining the military to getting to the Kabul airport gate in August of 2021, and everything in between. I had to talk about my work as leader of Afghan's first Female Tactical Platoon and my missions.

I currently have asylum status. I applied for my green card more than two years ago but have not received it yet.

Many of the other FTP women now in the United States also have asylum status but, like me, they have been waiting for years to receive their green cards without receiving a decision.



A Female Tactical Platoon poster, 2016. (Afghan National Army)

Many of these women would like to join the US military, but without a green card, they are not eligible to do so. In addition, some of the women have had their employment authorization documents expire, which has created difficulties with employment and financial stability. This is causing ongoing concerns over their asylum being revoked, the potential for deportation, the inability to leave the country to visit family members, and a laundry list of other challenges with employment, healthcare eligibility, access to education, and no clear picture when they might one day receive citizenship.

These challenges are what drive our advocacy efforts at Next Mission [see below]. FTPs are longing for stability and a feeling that we belong in the US. Someday we hope to become citizens and continue serving a greater good, beyond our efforts in Afghanistan.

Since I left…

A lot of my colleagues who were not able to evacuate and with whom I spent every single day with doing training or going to the missions, are disappearing, or getting captured or killed.

I had a male colleague, J (I am not using his full name here). I used to teach him English and handwriting. Learning English was harder for him, but he picked up handwriting very quickly. He and I also went for four mile runs outside of camps two times a week at 6 am. He was pretty fast but I tried to keep up with him. He was an instructor. Every time he wanted to make a training regimen for his soldiers, he came to my door and said, "Let's work on this together." He was very serious but very kind also.

After the Taliban captured him, they tortured him every day. We have no idea if the Taliban will release him or kill him. One of my friends said that J's son went to see his father but he couldn't recognize him because his entire face was black from the beatings he was enduring. So many of my friends have the same stories, just different names.

Today in Afghanistan, girls are not allowed to attend school beyond the sixth grade. The Taliban have also changed the education system and introduced more of their own interpretation and ideology into what boys are taught. Many social science subjects and other educational materials have been removed or changed. The Taliban's only goal is to move their political desires forward.

For all of those reasons, I had to leave. ■

This essay was adapted from an earlier work that appeared online in Immigrant Arc *in 2022.* VBC Magazine *would like to thank Mahnaz Akbari for allowing us to publish her updated version.*

In 2021, Mahnaz and Army veteran Rebekah Edmondson, founded Next Mission Inc., a non-profit dedicated to advocating for permanent residency and building supportive communities for Afghan military partners and their families throughout the US.

To learn more about their work and support their efforts go to nxtmission.org.

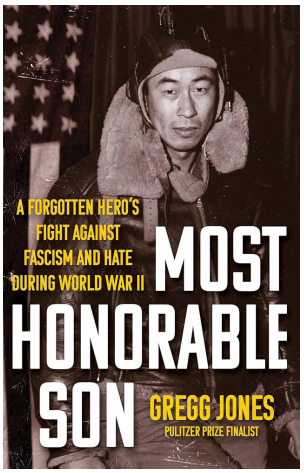
NXT MISSION
INSPIRING A PATH FORWARD

A WWII GUNNER'S ROMANIAN MISSION

By Gregg Jones

An investigative journalist and Pulitzer Prize finalist, Gregg Jones has covered civil wars and insurgencies in Asia, Latin American and the early months of US military operations in Afghanistan. His book Last Stand at Khe Sanh *received the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation's General Wallace M. Greene Jr. Award for distinguished non-fiction.*

The following is an excerpt from Jones' 2026 book Most Honorable Son *(Citadel Press) which tells the story of Japanese American WWII gunner Ben Kuroki. It is available at online bookstores.*



A special introduction and postscript have been provided by the author.

Introduction

In the fall of 1943, a Western Union telegram was delivered to my mother's home in Kennett, Missouri, announcing that her oldest brother, Technical Sergeant L.H. White, had disappeared during a bombing mission over Europe. A seven-year ordeal culminated in March 1950 with a single coffin containing the remains of L.H. and eight crewmates being lowered into a grave at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis.



Ben on leave in Alexandria, Egypt in summer of 1943. (Public Domain)

I learned fragments of my uncle's story during family visits to that gravesite. I learned more during Sunday visits with my maternal grandmother in northeast Arkansas. My grandmother had a book about one of the raids her oldest son had survived, the low-level raid on Hitler's Romanian oilfields. Poring over that book on those trips, I came across a photograph of an American airman of Asian ancestry. I learned from the caption that Ben Kuroki had fought "fifty air battles in Europe, Africa and Asia."

I also learned that Ben and my Uncle L.H. had served together in the same heavy bomber unit in the summer and fall of 1943. My uncle and Ben had both survived the first bombing of Rome on July 19, 1943, and they had survived the Ploiesti low-level raid. My uncle and his crew disappeared two months to the day after the Ploiesti mission. A little more than four weeks later, Ben flew his final mission with the 93rd and returned to America. A Pacific combat tour lay ahead.

In surviving fifty-eight combat missions as a B-24 and B-29 gunner in three combat theaters, Ben faced death on a daily basis. None of those missions was as horrific as the smokestack-level raid on Hitler's Romanian oilfields on August 1, 1943. On that day, more than 170 US B-24 crews flew their overloaded bombers 1,000 miles into enemy territory and attacked the most heavily defended Axis target in Europe. More than 300 Americans died and five posthumously received the Medal of Honor.

This is what Ben Kuroki saw and experienced over Ploiesti.

A Hellhole of Fire, Flame, and Smoke

An excerpt from *Most Honorable Son*

Peering ahead through the Plexiglas top turret of *Tupelo Lass*, Ben clutched the hand controller of his twin .50-caliber machine guns as Ploiesti's smokestacks took shape through the summer haze. More than a minute had passed since K. O. Dessert had followed the three waves of 93rd bombers ahead of him into the corrective left turn executed by Addison Baker, and yet there was still no sign of the formidable enemy defenses that supposedly awaited them.

Ben had sensed that the raid was going to be one of the biggest moments of his life, but his eagerness to make history had been tempered by his doubts about the low-level plan. In the forty-eight hours before takeoff, a couple of his buddies had asked British antiaircraft gunners protecting their desert airfield what they thought about the American strategy. The Tommies thought it was daft. "They said it would be just suicide to go in that [low]," Ben said. "That the smaller guns would really get you." Now, as the American bombers closed within five minutes of Hitler's prized oil refineries without encountering a single enemy gun or fighter plane, some of the 93rd men wondered whether the low-level plan had been a masterstroke after all.

And then, "all hell was breaking loose everywhere," Ben recalled.

In an instant, the 93rd bombers found themselves trapped in a gauntlet of guns—an array of conventional ground emplacements, rooftop positions, and towers. Harmless-looking haystacks and railroad boxcars collapsed to reveal more guns. Now everything in the Ploiesti air defense arsenal—from machine guns and nimble 37-millimeter antiaircraft weapons to hulking 88-millimeter aircraft-killers that fired fifteen or more twenty-pound shells a minute—blasted away at the four-engine American bombers streaking past. Ben watched in fascination and horror as the landscape was suddenly transformed into a sea of pulsating lights.

In the cockpit, K. O. Dessert struggled to keep *Tupelo Lass* steady as prop wash from other B-24s and shell bursts made it feel like he was at the tiller of a small boat in a raging sea. Beside him, Jake Epting made himself useful by shouting out the location of enemy guns: "Eight o'clock! Twelve o'clock! Three o'clock!" And then: "Shoot all over!" As Dessert tried to keep *Tupelo Lass* low to the ground without clipping a smokestack or refinery building, a new threat emerged: bus-size balloons bobbing from steel cables strung with contact explosives.

Inside the bombers, the noise was deafening: the clatter of machine guns, roaring engines, exploding shells, and the sound of shrapnel and enemy bullets spattering and piercing the thin aluminum skin of the B-24s. Clouds of shell fragments and shards of metal sheared from bombers by enemy fire fluttered in the prop-churned air. Sensory overload and fear overwhelmed some of the Americans. In a scene repeated in several bombers, a sobbing 328th Squadron gunner sank to the floor beneath his waist gun.

As terrifying as it was being shot at from point-blank range, some of the 93rd men found they liked being able to see the faces of the gunners who were trying to kill them. For Ben, blasting away from the top turret, the free-for-all bore a vague resemblance to a Nebraska pheasant hunt: Spot a target, fire, spot a target, fire, spot, fire. The frenzied speed of the action gave the battle a surreal air. Jake Epting saw two enemy gunners fall at their weapons, only to be instantly shoved aside by two comrades who took their place and resumed firing.

By now, Dessert had dropped *Tupelo Lass* below fifty feet to avoid the murderous enemy fire; Epting would later say they were even lower, crossing the target at twenty feet. All around them shells and bullets ripped into B-24s and flames streamed from crippled aircraft.

Ben's vantage point in the final wave of the 93rd's main force afforded him a commanding view of the horrific tableau. Dead ahead an 88-millimeter round exploded in the nose of Addison Baker's *Hell's Wench*, followed by other rounds that smashed into the wing and cockpit. Within seconds, the 93rd commander's ship looked like a flying torch. Rather than attempt an emergency landing to save himself and his crew, Baker made good on his promise to lead his men to the target—even if it was an improvised target he had picked out of the haze.

To keep airborne as long as possible, the group commander dumped his bombs and flew on, a stream of flaming gasoline spanning the length of his ship. The flames became too much for one of Addison Baker's men, and he leapt from the nose wheel hatch and tumbled through the air, "so close we could see his burned legs," one pilot recalled. Another shell slammed into *Hell's Wench* and Baker's right wing sagged.



A B-24 bomber over Ploiesti, Romania, August 1943. (Public Domain)

The cockpit of *Hell's Wench* was now consumed by flames, yet Addison Baker and John Jerstad somehow remained in control of their aircraft. In one final act of extraordinary heroism, Baker and Jerstad willed *Hell's Wench* to three hundred feet in a desperate attempt to allow their men to attempt a crazy-low parachute escape. Three or four men jumped from the waist windows only seconds before *Hell's Wench* crashed into a field just beyond the refineries. None of the *Hell's Wench* crew survived; Baker and Jerstad were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

With *Hell's Wench* gone and several sister ships in flames, *Tupelo Lass* roared up a Ploiesti boulevard at treetop level. Ben watched as the wing of a nearby 93rd aircraft struck a smokestack and the aircraft "plummeted to the ground [and] absolutely disintegrated in a terrible explosion." As other Liberators burst into flames or crashed, one of Ben's crewmates broke down and had to be restrained. Ben watched another burning B-24 to his right sink to the ground and explode "into a million pieces."

Ben thought *Tupelo Lass* was doomed when a gasoline storage tank exploded in their path and the tank's metal shell shot skyward like a tin can. But at the last second Dessert deftly turned *Tupelo Lass* nearly upright on one wing and somehow avoided the inferno. As they roared past the pillar of fire, Ben felt the intense heat as if a giant oven door had been opened.

Amid the carnage and chaos, K. O. Dessert kept his cool. Shells that seemed headed for his cockpit somehow kept missing on either side. Al Naum released his bombs on a refinery, and Dessert poured on the power to escape the enemy fire.

All around *Tupelo Lass*, other crews fought for their lives. To the left, Dick Wilkinson and Edwin Baker were flying low and fast in *Little Lady*, their gunners firing nearly nonstop at the enemy gunners trying to bring them down. Over the town, a church steeple suddenly loomed as the bombardier was about to release his bombs. Wilkie coolly raised his left wing and cleared the steeple. The time on the clock tower showed five minutes before three o'clock local time (1155 GMT). Without warning, a flurry of antiaircraft shells whooshed past them, unleashed by guns concealed in a row of eucalyptus trees ahead. Another shell hit the number

three engine and still another slammed into their belly. *Little Lady* shuddered and momentarily felt like it "stopped cold in midair," Edwin Baker said. Their number three engine was on fire and gasoline gushed from holes in an auxiliary tank. Baker and the crew's spare pilot pulled the fire extinguisher on the flaming engine and feathered the prop, averting one crisis.

Little Lady's navigator yelled "bombs away" and three thousand pounds of ordnance tumbled from the ravaged aircraft. A few seconds later, when K. O. Dessert turned *Tupelo Lass* on one wing to avoid the ruptured storage tank, Dick Wilkinson followed close behind, praying that the raw gas and fumes that now filled his bomb bay wouldn't explode. They didn't. "As we passed the heart of the explosions, it felt like passing a hot iron close to your face," Edwin Baker recalled. "Suddenly we popped out of the hellhole of fire, flame, and smoke into the clear sky and green fields beyond. Wilkie and I looked at each other and smiled."

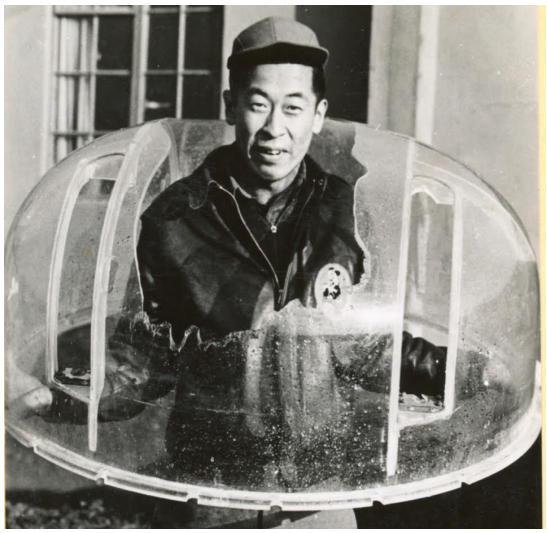
Off the right wing of *Tupelo Lass*, Hap Kendall had his own troubles in a B-24 named Lucky. He dodged the storage tank explosion and barely cleared a smokestack with his right wing, but the abrupt maneuvers forced the bombardier to hold their bombs. Kendall streaked across the city in search of another target, found another refinery, and the bombardier unleashed their ordnance. As Kendall steered his crew out of the fire, Lucky was barely airworthy: control wires severed, hydraulic lines ruptured, and at least one fuel tank riddled with shell holes, leaking gasoline. Kendall alerted his men to prepare to abandon ship.

One of the last B-24s to cross Ploiesti in Dessert's fourth wave was *Honky Tonk Gal*, piloted by a lanky Texan, twenty-two-year-old Second Lieutenant Hubert Womble. By the time Womble emerged from Ploiesti's deadly ring of fire, he had lost three engines to enemy fire and had been wounded when a shell exploded in the control pedestal beside him. His copilot had taken the controls and was struggling to remain airborne. Spotting a lush cornfield, Second Lieutenant Lawrence Lancashire executed an emergency landing that would have been perfect if not for a ditch on the far side. When *Honky Tonk Gal* hit the ditch, the landing gear collapsed and the B-24 came to a lurching halt. Womble tried to rise from his seat, only to discover that his left foot had been severed. "It was still in my boot near the rudder pedals," he later recalled. Womble's men helped him exit *Honky Tonk Gal* through the top hatch and tended to his wounds as they awaited the Romanian troops who would take them into custody.

Emerging from the enemy kill zone around Ploiesti, K. O. Dessert and Jake Epting proceeded to the prearranged rendezvous point to search for comrades with whom they could share the long journey back to Benghazi. Finding no other friendly aircraft, navigator Edward Weir set a course for the Greek coast, and *Tupelo Lass* set off alone. "It was the strangest feeling because we couldn't see any of the planes we were supposed to be flying with," Ben said. "We were all alone."

Of the thirty-three 93rd bombers that had reached the target area, six had been shot down and several others were in bad shape. As the four groups of B-24s that now trailed the 93rd approached Ploiesti, enemy fighters scoured the skies around the city to pick off crippled planes that had managed to survive the gauntlet of antiaircraft fire. Those that eluded the guns and the fighters headed south in search of refuge.

It was clear to Dick Wilkinson and Hap Kendall that their battered aircraft would never make it back to Benghazi. Turkey was



Ben holding the shattered plexiglass turret from his 30th bombing mission over Europe, November 1943. (Jean Lukesh)

the closest place of refugee—a neutral country where American airmen would hold the preferred legal status of internees rather than prisoners of war. In *Tupelo Lass*, K. O. Dessert and Jake Epting were amazed by their good fortune—their aircraft didn't appear to have been hit, and so they were flying under full power and control. But navigator Edward Weir had prepared for all contingencies, and he had marked on his maps the location of airfields in Turkey, Crete, and Sicily that could be used in an emergency. For now, the goal was to get as far away from Ploiesti as possible and to get back over the mountains of Yugoslavia and Albania to more familiar territory.

The return trip was proceeding smoothly when *Tupelo Lass* encountered clouds over Yugoslavia. Dessert and Epting were skilled in the art of flying by instrument, and so the transition presented nothing they couldn't handle. A few minutes ahead of *Tupelo Lass*, a cluster of 93rd aircraft from the first waves of Addison Baker's force had encountered the same clouds, with tragic results.

Three B-24s had formed up in a protective *V* for the return journey: *Exterminator*, piloted by Hugh Roper; *Let 'Er Rip*, piloted by Victor Olliffe; and *Thundermug*, piloted by Russel Longnecker. Roper and Olliffe were best friends since the early days of the 93rd, and they were at the end of their combat tours. Roper had six men aboard *Exterminator* who were flying their final mission, as well as another veteran 93rd officer, Captain Jack Jones, who had flown the mission as a spare pilot and observer. Longnecker had been among a group of Americans who had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force before America entered the war and had transferred into the Eighth Air Force in England only in April.

As they flew south from Ploiesti, the lead 93rd aircraft encountered clouds along the mountainous border between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Within each three-plane element, the pilots executed a standard maneuver to provide some distance from one another whenever flying into clouds. They would tighten up their formation when they emerged and found each other.

Entering a cloud, Longnecker executed the maneuver and distanced himself from Roper and Olliffe. When he emerged, Olliffe and Roper were gone. Their remains were recovered in Yugoslavia after the war, and the two friends were buried with their crew-



Ben in flight gear with B-29 bomber Tupelo Lass*, circa 1943. (Public Domain)*

mates in group graves only a few feet from each other at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis. Olliffe and Roper prided themselves on the tight formations they flew, and they had collided in a cloud and fallen to their deaths. Nineteen souls aboard the two aircraft were killed: all eleven men aboard Roper's *Exterminator*, and Olliffe and seven others aboard *Let 'Er Rip*. Three gunners toward the rear of Olliffe's B-24 managed to unfurl their parachutes and landed in Bulgaria, where they were captured by Axis forces.

Flying alone through the mountains, *Tupelo Lass* avoided such perils. Reaching the Ionian coast near the Greek island of Corfu, Dessert and Epting made their final decision of the day: Their fuel situation seemed to be good and their aircraft was flying well; they would push on to their home field outside Benghazi, some 525 miles due south.

After the day's trials, the flight across the Mediterranean was uneventful. The men were left alone with their thoughts and visions of the terrible things they had witnessed. Dusk was falling when they lined up the runway at Site 7 and landed. The time was 1740 GMT or 8:40 p.m. local time. They had been in the air thirteen hours and five minutes. It was Ben's twenty-fourth mission, and the longest and deadliest he would ever fly.

As Dessert taxied to the designated parking stand for *Tupelo Lass*, the men inside were struck by what they saw. The 409th Squadron parking spots that had been filled that morning when they taxied away for takeoff were now empty. The implication hit Ben: *My God, they must not have made it*. Only one more 409th Squadron aircraft would land that evening.

Climbing stiffly from *Tupelo Lass*, Ben and the others gave their aircraft a careful inspection. They were amazed: *Tupelo Lass* didn't have a single bullet hole or shrapnel mark.

Among the men who turned out to welcome the first 409th Squadron crew home from Ploiesti was Colonel Jacob Smart, the Hap Arnold aide who had intended to sit in the copilot's seat alongside K. O. Dessert before his last-minute grounding. Tears streamed down Smart's face as he greeted Dessert. Smart knew a lot of men wouldn't make it back, and, as architect of the low-level plan, he had wanted to put himself in harm's way as an act of solidarity with those who were destined to die. It was already clear to Smart that his fears of heavy losses had been realized. Good men had been lost trying to execute his plan, and the least he could have done was share that danger with them. He would have to live with that haunting knowledge for the rest of his life. "He wanted so badly to go on that raid," Dessert later said.

Dessert walked away from *Tupelo Lass* alongside Ben and Sergeant Raymond Wierciszowski, the courageous mechanic who had risked his life to document many of the raid's heartbreaking moments with his Kodak camera. Sergeant Wier summoned the nerve to ask a question that had nagged him during the flight back.

"Major Dessert, was that a rough raid?" Wier asked uncertainly.

Postscript

Ben Kuroki completed his World War II service by flying twenty-eight missions as a B-29 gunner on raids against Japan—the only Japanese American to fly combat missions in the Pacific. He returned home a national hero in the fall of 1945 and after a flurry of high-profile speeches and media interviews, he embarked on what he called his Fifty-Ninth Mission Tour: a seventeen-month, nationwide speaking tour in which he challenged Americans to "win the peace" by addressing poverty and racial inequities at home.



Ben receives the Distinguished Service Medal from Ret. Gen. William Dendinger, August 2005. (Public Domain)

Afterward, Ben returned to his home state of Nebraska, earned a journalism degree from the University of Nebraska and published and edited weekly newspapers in Nebraska, Idaho, and Michigan before concluding his distinguished career as a news editor in Ventura County, California. He was awarded the Army's Distinguished Service Medal in 2005 and, after another decade of honors, died in 2015 at the age of ninety-eight. ■

NO ONE ORDERED ME TO STOP

FROM SOLDIER TO ARTIST

By Samantha Juan

Samantha Juan is a Filipina Persian American writer, artist, speaker and Army veteran whose work examines the body's long memory of survival. After serving for 10 years, including as a signals intelligence analyst and Cultural Support Team Leader attached to Joint Special Operations Command in Afghanistan, Samantha began exploring the cost of performance, dissociation, trauma, addiction, motherhood, and the long return to self.

A Bronze Star recipient and a 2014 Pat Tilman Scholar, Samantha holds a BFA from Old Dominion University and an MLA from Johns Hopkins University. Through writing, painting, public speaking, and advocacy, she creates honest conversations around veteran mental health, creative healing, psychedelic therapy, and the difference between surviving and truly living.

In the following essay, Samantha traces the impact of the physical and psychological weight she carried as a soldier in her role as a Cultural Support Team leader, transition to civilian life and emergence as an artist.

At Camp Mackall, a training area near Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the sand gave way beneath every step.

It was 2011, and I was there for the very first Cultural Support Team Assessment and Selection, a program recruiting women service members to train for assignments alongside Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. The work would take us into spaces male operators could not enter in the same way, especially rooms with Afghan women and children. I had volunteered for the chance to be selected.



Samantha during CST training at Camp Mackall, NC, 2011. (Samantha Juan)

At the time, I did not think very hard about what that responsibility might require of me. I wanted to be good at what the Army said mattered. My leadership wanted me to apply, and the possibility of being chosen carried its own gravity. There was respect in it, and the appeal of being among the first women asked to do this kind of work. I focused on the application packet, the physical, and the next requirement. I knew how to complete what was in front of me. That afternoon, completing it meant carrying another soldier.

I shifted my rucksack to the front of my body before pulling her across my shoulders in a fireman's carry. The weight divided me in opposite directions. My ruck dragged me forward while her body pressed down across my back. Ahead, the terrain rose gradually, soft hills without enough incline to look difficult from a distance.

It was the hottest part of the day. No one told us how far we would go. The event ended only when the cadre—the instructors assessing us—called for a stop and directed us to switch positions.

Pain began low in my back and spread into my hips. I registered it, then placed it somewhere beneath the need to impress the men watching us. Asking for help never became a real option. I had come to prove I could carry what was given to me. Not only the physical, but the mental as well. My body understood the assignment more clearly than it understood its own limits.

Each footfall sank just enough to steal momentum from the next. I adjusted the soldier's weight without breaking stride and kept my eyes on the ground ahead. My breath shortened. The edges of my vision began to blur, but my body continued working after I had moved some distance away from it.

There was no encouraging voice inside my head, no private speech about strength. What remained was the task: keep her body from sliding, keep moving, give the cadre no reason to notice me for the wrong thing. From the outside, I was still carrying the soldier. Inside, I was floating above the woman doing it.

That distance made difficult things easier. Pain became information instead of interruption. Fear quieted me enough to take the next step. I did not understand this as dissociation then. It felt more like competence, and at selection that distinction worked in my favor.

The cadre watched without encouragement. I had no idea how I was doing. All I knew was that no one had stopped me. When the call finally came to switch, I lowered the soldier from my shoulders. There was no announcement that I had passed. No one read a time or asked whether I was all right. Almost immediately, I was assigned to be the casualty. Another soldier would have to carry my weight. I dropped my rucksack into the sand and reached for water. My back and hips still held the shape of my load. My breath had not fully returned, but the exercise had already moved on. The cadre had seen what they needed to see: I could accept the weight, move it across difficult ground, and keep the cost from becoming visible.

***

In 2012, I deployed to Afghanistan's Logar Province as a Cultural Support Team leader supporting SEAL Team Six. Red Squadron was the first squadron I supported. I was the only woman and



Aerial view of Logar Province, Afghanistan. (Public Domain)

the only Army soldier working with the team, which gave me a level of autonomy I had never had in my regular unit. No handbook told me exactly how I was supposed to fit into their rhythm. I worked out much of it in practice. When we went inside the compounds I moved toward the women and children with an interpreter, gathered what I could, and brought that information back to the team. Then we were expected to compare what each side of the household told us before the mission moved forward. With Red, what I brought back became part of the mission.

On one operation, I entered the women's side of a compound and saw a young mother struggling to nurse her baby. The child was crying and would not latch. The mother kept trying. I took off my helmet and knelt beside her.

There was no step in our training manual for what came next. I laid a pillow across her lap and showed her how to position the baby and wait for the mouth to open wider before bringing the child closer. Through my interpreter, I guided her until the baby finally latched.

The crying stopped.

Her shoulders dropped. Relief moved across her face, then across her mother's. An older woman addressed the women and children around her, looking directly at each of them as she made clear they were to cooperate with my questions. Kindness had changed the room before I had time to think of it as a strategy.

This mattered because my job depended on the kind of access that force alone could not create. The information women shared with me could confirm, contradict, or add to what the men in the compound were telling the tactical questioner. We were supposed to compare notes and help the team decide what to do next.

Red Squadron treated that exchange as part of the work. Their regard was rarely announced. It showed up in whether the information I brought back entered the conversation.

***

When Blue Squadron rotated in, the temperature changed. One evening around six, we gathered inside a tan debriefing tent lined with plywood benches that reminded me of church pews. I sat in my usual place, alone in the back corner, and avoided eye contact.



Samantha as a Cultural Support Team Leader attached to Special Forces Operation in Logar Province, Afghanistan, 2012. (Samantha Juan)

The tactical questioner was my counterpart on the men's side of the compounds. During the debrief, someone asked him a question. He stood in front of the room.

"I don't give a fuck what Sam has to say," he said. "I don't trust any of her intel. All the women lie anyway."

The words crossed the tent and found me in the corner. No one asked me to respond, and I did not want to. I stayed on the plywood bench while tension moved through the room. At Camp Mackall, I had carried a soldier across soft sand to prove I could do this work. Now I was watching the work itself be dismissed.

A senior enlisted leader in Blue Squadron corrected him immediately. Working with me, he made clear, was part of the mission. The information I gathered could not simply be ignored. His correction mattered. It kept Blue Squadron from becoming a simple story about one unit rejecting me. One man had dismissed my role; another used his authority to require the collaboration the mission called for. Rank could compel the exchange, but it could not create belief in the value of what came through me.

I understood the difference because I had already experienced another way of working. With Red, I did not have to fight uphill before doing the job. With Blue, I learned that competence did not guarantee recognition, and that being physically capable enough to enter the room did not mean the room would value me once I was inside it.

At Camp Mackall, the assessors had measured how much weight my body could carry without asking for help. In Afghanistan, I learned that a woman could carry information all the way back and still have to prove that it weighed something.

I came back from Afghanistan in November 2012. Reintegration at Fort Bragg felt less like a return than a series of tasks to complete at different stations: sign here, move there, keep going. Then I was back in Hawaii, standing at the rear of the reception and integration platoon that processed new soldiers into the unit—the same platoon I had once led.

Before deployment, I had been its platoon sergeant. Most of the soldiers around me had no idea that I had just returned from

nine months in Afghanistan, where I had served as one of the first women selected for the Cultural Support Team program and supported Special Operations missions. To them I was simply another NCO standing in formation. I did nothing to correct that impression. After months of working with unusual autonomy and responsibility, explaining where I had been felt less important than getting through the formation and leaving when it was over.

Even then, I was not ready to let the military version of myself go. I had begun an application packet for Civil Affairs, another path that might let me remain in an operational world where I already knew how to be useful. During the medical exam required for airborne training, doctors found ovarian cysts. I was told the finding disqualified me from airborne training, ending that application.

Because I had not reenlisted, I could leave.

***

Going to college and studying art had been a promise I made to myself in Afghanistan. It was the less familiar choice, one in which I had no rank, no reputation, and no proof I would be any good.

Within weeks of leaving Hawaii, I was sitting in English 101 at Virginia's Old Dominion University when a student played a Miley Cyrus video from a phone over the professor's lecture. I stared across the room at the professor. She looked close to my age. For a second, our eyes met in shared exasperation.

School gave me a schedule before it gave me a community. I had a classroom to report to, but no unit, no established network, and very few people who knew the life I had just left. I was in a new city and newly married to a man I had known only a short time. Most of the students around me had recently finished high school.

In the Army, time and attention belonged to someone, and instructions carried consequence. Here, students talked over the person teaching them, checked their phones, and treated the hour as optional. The professor could ask for their attention. She could not command it.

I hated that. What surprised me was what I did with that anger: nothing.

I became quieter. Several professors felt more like peers than authority figures, but I did not want to appear overeager or make myself conspicuous. I sat through class focused and contained, a turtle pulling into its shell. My art studio gave me somewhere else to put that energy.

At home, I worked behind a closed door at a heavy wooden table raised on cinder blocks. In one three-dimensional design class, we were assigned to recreate an ordinary household object at life size using cardboard. Scraps covered the floor around my cutting mat. My hair was twisted into a topknot while I scored, folded, wedged, and glued pieces together, trying to make the structure stand on its own for the required thirty seconds.

I liked the problem: the blade moving through cardboard, the precision of a score, two cuts fitting tightly enough to hold without collapsing. I also knew how to turn interest into endurance.

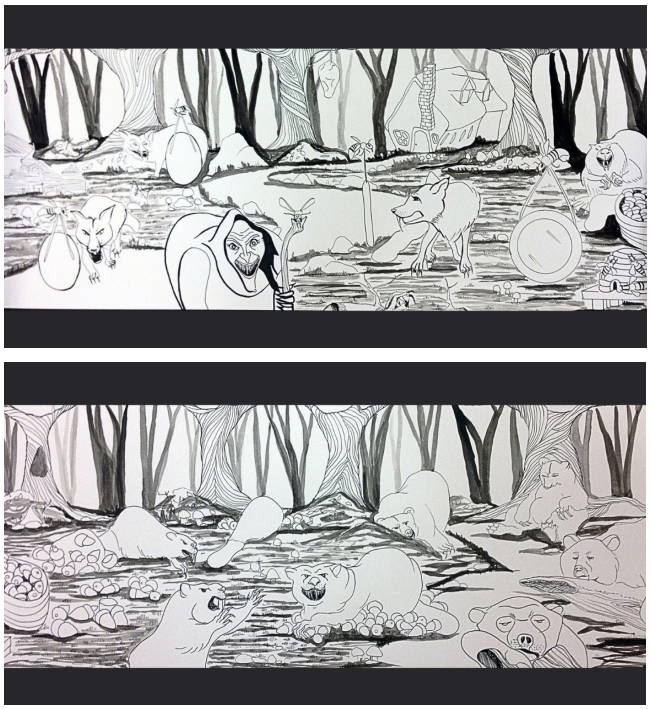
Red Bull and Adderall helped keep me there. I stopped paying attention to hunger or sleep and barely spoke to my new husband. A classroom assignment had become more urgent than almost everything outside the studio.

The uniform was gone. The appetite to prove myself was not.

Art critiques offered another version of the same test. I listened for the vocabulary professors respected, then arranged my ideas inside it. I could sound composed, even when the language felt borrowed. What came more naturally was the work itself.

By senior year, I submitted an ink drawing called *Seven Deadly Sins* to the annual senior art show. It stretched horizontally across the paper, moving from one sin to the next through illustrations of forest animals. I received a scholarship through the show.

When the exhibition opened, the drawing hung first on the main wall as visitors entered. I watched people step toward it, then closer still, bringing their faces almost to the surface to inspect the detail.



Two sections of Samantha's Seven Deadly Sins. *Ink on paper, 2015. (Samantha Juan)*

During my years in the military, being watched usually meant being measured. This felt different. No one was checking my pace, my posture, or whether my body could carry the load I had been assigned. They were looking at something my hands had made because they wanted to see more.

I did not suddenly know who I was outside the Army. Art school had not made the old habits disappear. I could still turn curiosity into competition with myself and exhaustion into evidence that I cared enough. My artwork on the wall offered a new kind of proof: I could make something that held attention without having to make my body the thing being tested.

By 2026, more than a decade after graduating, I still knew how to turn art into another test.



Samantha in her art studio, 2026. (Samantha Juan)

At the Workhouse Arts Center in Virginia, a former prison converted into working artist studios, I had a space of my own. By then, painting was no longer an assignment or a question of whether I belonged in art school. It was my work.

For my exhibition *In Bloom*, I made a painting with the same name: fifty-four inches tall and ninety inches wide. It was too large for the wall space in my studio, so I laid the unstretched canvas on the floor. Because it would anchor the show, I wanted it to be more than good.

I worked bent over the canvas for hours, moving from one section to another, straightening up, shifting down its length, then folding back toward the work.

Eventually, my lower back began to ache. At first, I kept moving. Getting upright took longer. Crossing from one position to the next became slower. I took ibuprofen and returned to the canvas.

The pain stayed.

The ache was in the same low part of my back that had burned at Camp Mackall beneath another soldier's weight. During selection, I had registered the pain and kept moving until the assessors told us to switch. Art school had given that instinct new materials, but the instinct itself was familiar. I could love the work and still make endurance part of the proof.

Standing over *In Bloom*, I felt that old pull again. The painting would anchor the show, but nothing in the studio required me to finish it that night.

I sat down on the bench.

No one ordered me to stop.

For a while, I let my back settle. I shifted on the bench, moving enough to loosen the stiffness, until my body began to feel like mine again. The canvas stayed on the floor. Then I started cleaning.

I put the paint away. I washed my brushes. I did not try to squeeze one more mark out of the night simply because I could.

The painting was unfinished. That used to feel like a problem I needed to solve before I was allowed to leave it alone.

This time, I could return to it. I cleaned the last brush and left *In Bloom* on the floor.

I would come back tomorrow. ■



SAVE THE DATE
A VBC Evening with Samantha Juan
Bronze Star recipient and CST Leader
Monday, March 22nd, at 7pm

Join us as Army veteran Samantha Juan shares stories about her time as a Cultural Support Team leader in Afghanistan working with Special Forces SEAL Team Six. Learn first-hand about her journey transitioning back into civilian life, and her emergence as an artist, writer and advocate for veteran healing.

Zoom link available via the online events tab at veteransbreakfastclub.org.

One Flag, Around the World for America 250



An ordinary 5-by-8-foot American flag began an extraordinary journey on Flag Day, June 14, 2025, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. From there, it went around the world and in all 50 states courtesy of the Pittsburgh-based National Flag Foundation.

The project, called Sojourn 250, sent the Stars and Stripes on a world tour in celebration of America's 250th birthday.

Sojourn 250 was also a pilgrimage, commemorating those who died in service to the United States. The flag's first destination was Florence American Cemetery in Italy where 4,392 Americans lie buried. From there, it traveled to all 25 other overseas cemeteries maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC).

That 40,000-mile overseas journey was just the beginning. After returning to the United States in October 2025, the flag continued its travels under the care of sheriffs and other escorts, visiting communities across the country. Along the way, it appeared at

"In addition to freedom, liberty and honor," National Flag Foundation Chairman Romel Nicholas explained, "the flag represents the American common ground. Anyone who follows the news knows there's division everywhere. The flag is something that can bring us together. We want it to touch all Americans."

The journey came full circle in Pittsburgh on July 2–3, 2026, with 13 regional stops. On July 4, more than 230 American Legion Riders and passengers escorted the flag from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. After a presentation at Nationals Park, the flag completed its journey at Arlington National Cemetery.

In September, the flag was presented to the American Legion's national commander for permanent display at the Legion's national headquarters and museum in Indianapolis.

The flag's journey has ended, but the stories it accumulated live on at nationalflagfoundation.org.

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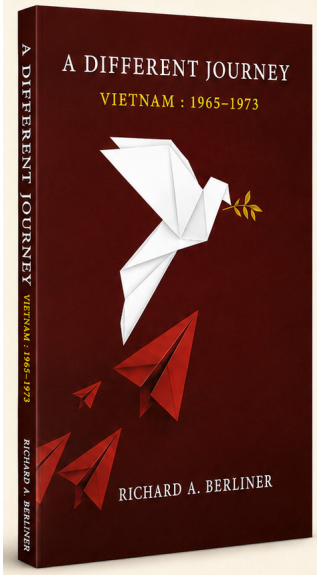
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