

Praise for
SEE ME FOR WHO I AM

Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk*

“If you are a military veteran like me, you may find comfort in the familiar as you read. You know these men and women. You know their words and speech patterns, how they tell a story, it all feels right. But other readers will want more, and for good reason. We can’t help but hope—though none say so—that producing this volume proved a salve for the men and women contained within it.”

Phil Zabriskie, author of *The Kill Switch*

“‘I want you guys to understand’ begins the first piece in this valuable, powerful collection. What follows are blunt, plain spoken, tales and remembrances that are at once poignant and harrowing and funny and proud and remorseful—and that, yes, will help us understand much more of what these young men and women have seen, been through, survived, and carry with them still.”

William Corley, Veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom, PhD

“This visionary collection scores a direct hit on the stereotypes—‘heroes or victims or monsters’—that insulate most civilians from the veterans in their midst, and will be a welcome companion both for veterans who have endured the stifling imposition of simplified views of military service and for civilians looking for better opening lines than, ‘Did you kill anyone?’ or ‘Thank you for your service.’”

Matt Gallagher, author of *Youngblood*

“Chronicles of battle are nearly as old as combat itself, but they’ve taken on a distinct significance in 21st-century America, where war is something we bring to other places, other cultures, other people. That such a thing is being carried out in an entire citizenry’s name by a small selection of that citizenry remains a preeminent element of these wars, and our time and place in American history. The gap today between civilian and veteran is pronounced and vast. But is it unbridgeable? It is not. See Me for Who I Am is for anyone who’s ever wondered, ‘What was it like?’ These twenty talented vet-writers answer that question with directness and courage. I can’t wait to see what they write next.”

David J. Danelo, Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, author of *The Return: A Field Manual for Life after Combat*

“This is as authentic as it gets. These essays reflect the eloquent, powerful voice of the 21st-century American combat veterans’ collective efforts to navigate their way back into a society that offers gratitude and respect, but lacks empathy and understanding.”

Chris Dumaine Leche, PhD, editor of *Outside the Wire: American Voices from Afghanistan*

“The veteran-writers in this collection invite you to witness the most spiritually transformative and physically visceral moments of their lives. The inspired writings of the men and women whose work appears here must be read as a reminder of the many heroes among us who have traded home for the battlefield in order to protect us all.”

See Me for
Who I Am

See Me for Who I Am

STUDENT VETERANS' STORIES
OF WAR AND COMING HOME

Edited By David Chrisinger

Foreword by Brian Castner,
author of *The Long Walk*

Afterword by Matthew Hefti,
author of *A Hard and Heavy Thing*

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To the men and women
who never got a chance
to tell their stories.

“Tell the truth. Tell the truth with your whole body. Don’t spare the reader. You tell it. We killed plenty of people. I mean me. Me. Me. Tell the terror and the horror of it. The total waste of it. Put the truth in your reader’s hands. Write a letter. Tell the truth to a real person here in front of you. She wants to hear your story. Tell it to her. I want to hear your story. Tell it to me.”

—Larry Heinemann,
Vietnam Veteran and author

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FOREWORD

By Brian Castner

Perhaps no self-contained diorama better represents the modern gulf between our military veterans and average citizens as this set of essays produced in David Chrisinger's remarkable freshman seminar at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Freshman seminar. At most colleges and in most classrooms this unthreatening required course has evolved into a crossover ritual mixed with an eclectic reading list. Professors teach about what it means to be a college student, how to write, how to meet homework and paper deadlines. Some try to throw in a bit of required reading vis-à-vis their pet projects, but often there are equal doses of basic life skills, such as instructions on how to do laundry. In sum, it is a symbol of delayed adulthood in modern America.

All of which places Chrisinger's recent freshman seminar, tailored to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, in even starker relief. Student Aaron Lewis needs no help learning to operate a washing machine. Instead, in his bridge class he grappled with the fundamental paradox of military service: balancing what he learned in war with what was taken away. After calmly laying out his reasons for attempting suicide following his deployment to Iraq, Lewis somehow still writes about his time in the Army overall, "I like to think that I came out with more than I went in with."

There lies, exposed, that divergent worldview and accumulation of experiences often referred to as the civilian-military divide. When a twenty-two-year-old Afghan War veteran sits next to an eighteen-year-old true freshman, what do they even talk about?

It is a question often on the mind of Chrisinger's students, and they discuss it in this book in straightforward

and unadorned prose that barely registers a hint of embarrassment or self-consciousness. How did I end up here? After seeing and doing so much, what have I become?

The answers can be both heartbreaking and therapeutic. As a group, these soldiers-turned-students could be ripped off a recruiting poster: star football players, wrestlers, farm kids, screwups done good by the discipline of military service. Most were infantry grunts or engineers, searching for hidden IEDs. There is no gloss here, and not all of their insights are becoming; some wear a sense of superiority on their sleeve. But such bravado is at least well-earned, and honest. *Here are my warts, they say, where are yours?*

With insight and clarity, they display a genuine curiosity in the examination of their new circumstances. Why do they crave work outdoors, mucking stables, raising chickens and goats? Why is it so hard to sit in a classroom? What is it about a manual, repetitive task that brings so much peace? As they remember the grinding but stable routine of dangerous night patrols, the joy of operating the MK19 grenade launcher, the satisfaction of knowing their place in the world, they lay out all the dots for us to see, even if they aren't yet able to connect all of them on their own.

If you are a military veteran like me, you may find comfort in the familiar as you read. You know these men and women. You know their words and speech patterns, how they tell a story—it all feels right. But other readers will want more, and for good reason. They will want answers that cannot be found here, updates, assurance that everything is turning out okay for these men and women as they transition from warrior to student. Chrisinger taught no explicit writing-as-therapy course; but as readers, we can't help but hope—though none say so—that producing this volume proved a salve for the men and women whose writing is contained within it.

Other readers will want to go a step further, though. They will shout at the pages, *Should not this entire exercise be a cautionary tale? Stop*, these readers will say. *Do not join up. Look at what has happened to your potential comrades! Ignore the recruiting poster that bears your likeness! This military life is not what you think!*

In these pages, Ryan Callahan has already provided a response. For thousands of years, from Homer to Hemingway, war stories have both glorified and warned. Callahan read and heard it all.

“I didn’t listen though,” he writes. *“Young men rarely do.”*

Brian Castner

March 4, 2015

Grand Island, New York

INTRODUCTION

By David Chrisinger

During the fall and spring of the 2014-15 school year, I taught a freshman seminar at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point for student veterans in which we studied the history of American veterans coming home from war. My hope was that by studying the experiences of those who came before them, my students would gain valuable perspective and would be able to better process their own experiences. One of the many lessons we learned was that regardless of whether a military service member serves in a war zone or not, transitioning from the military to civilian life can be an extremely alienating and difficult process. Despite what most of us learned in school, this was true not only for those who were welcomed home from Vietnam with crippling indifference, but also for the “Greatest Generation” who fought the “Good War.” It has also been true for those who have come home to warm handshakes and sometimes over-the-top displays of gratitude and acclaim since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Don't believe me?

William C. Menninger was the chief psychiatric consultant to the Surgeon General of the Army from 1943 to 1946. Soon after the end of the Second World War, he observed that “most veterans were not ‘problems’ in themselves, [but] it would be playing ostrich not to recognize that they had problems, both big and little ones.” One of the bigger problems for many was dealing with the fact that they had given some of the best years of their life to the military, sometimes without receiving much in return. A veteran of the war in the Pacific, for example, told a reporter shortly after he returned home that he realized he

had “lost three years out of [his] life, playing catch up in school, catch up economically, catch up.” His old friends, he discovered, had graduated from college. Two were doctors. All had careers they were proud of. “I was so bitter,” he continued. “You wouldn’t recognize me.” When he separated from the military, this young man was advised that his wartime experience as an infantry sergeant qualified him to be a “Maine hunting guide.” Instead, he became “a drunk and a wild man.” He had no direction, no ambition. “I was just overwhelmed with bitterness,” he said, “and full of hate and envy.” This sense of disillusionment was so widespread among the sixteen million men and women who served in the American armed forces during the Second World War that according to a survey conducted in 1947, almost half of them felt that their military service had been an overall negative experience.

In 1946, a writer for *The Journal of Higher Education* warned that although many of the men who were now enrolled in colleges across the country had come home from the war more mature, with “a sober, realistic idealism, tempered by experience... eager to work for the ultimate goals they cherish,” others were bristling with resentment. That attitude, according to the author, brought about “general restlessness and dissatisfaction which extends to their class work, their instructors, and their fellow students.” Many of the veterans, the author continued, “resent the civilian attitude toward the war, with its complacency, its indifference to what is going on in combat areas, and its selfish considerations. Some men are inflamed over the relatively high salaries and the comparatively luxurious standards of living which men in civilian life have had in contrast to theirs in the Army.”

Then there was the war in Vietnam.

Many of those who fought in Vietnam came home and were reviled as unwelcome relics from an unpopular war.

Dr. Jonathan Shay is a clinical psychiatrist who has worked with thousands of Vietnam veterans since the war ended and has written extensively about its lasting effects. Here's how he described the shameful homecoming many veterans were subjected to:

They returned home to protesters who accused them of being torturers, perpetrators of atrocities, and baby killers. For every returning veteran who encountered this personally, there were many more who saw scenes selected for their dramatic and/or outrageous qualities in the TV news or heard n-th-hand stories. The media presented a barrage of images portraying the Vietnam veteran as crazy, drug-addicted, and violent. For many veterans who had joined up because they thought it was their duty as citizens, who had grown up on John Wayne and Audie Murphy, rejection by the community was infuriating.

Philip Caputo was a Marine platoon leader in Vietnam attached to one of the first combat units to land in Da Nang in 1965. Not unlike those who came home from previous wars, one of the biggest challenges he faced was dealing with the fact that those at home didn't seem to realize, or even care, that America was at war:

I used to get reactions of inexplicable anger, almost a fury, that would just come over me like that. When I was first going out with this girl who's now my wife, we were in a restaurant one night. I was shortly out of the Marines. I remember we were in a restaurant and I was looking at everybody, and I knew what was going on over there. I still had all sorts of buddies of mine who were over there, and in fact I had recently heard about one who had gotten killed. And I was watching everybody eating dinner and they were all well dressed and everything, and she said, 'What's the

matter?’ And I said, ‘Let’s get out of here. In about two minutes I’m going to get up and start busting heads.’ And I said, ‘I don’t know why.’ I wanted to go there and wipe that restaurant out. It was so strong in me. My whole body was tensing up.

“And that was followed in about an hour or two by this black depression,” Caputo continues, “almost like I felt guilty about feeling so infuriated that I got very, very depressed about the whole thing. And I was undergoing those kind of side waves, emotions going like this, all the time, to the point where there was a period in my life where it seemed like the only emotion I was capable of was rage.”

“I’d go to a public place where people my age, it was business as usual or it appeared to me to be business as usual,” says Dean K. Phillips, who was awarded the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars as a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam. “And I thought to myself, *Jesus Christ, you know, one of my best friends is blown in half and I keep thinking about that and here is this fucker sitting over here and the most important thing in his life appears to me to be whether the Dodgers win the pennant.*”

Fast forward to today. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center study, about half of all Americans admit that they have not been even marginally affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Think about it: Since 9/11, the American public has been largely insulated from the realities of war in the Middle East. Indeed, with tax cuts, no sense of collective national sacrifice on behalf of the war effort, and with less than 1 percent of the American population taking up arms to fight, we’ve become a nation “at peace with being at war,” in the words of David Carr. It’s this lack of shared sacrifice that can be particularly difficult for today’s veterans to deal with. In fact, according to author and documentary filmmaker Sebastian Junger, the most destructive challenge veterans of the

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan face “is the sense that their country doesn’t quite realize that it—and not just the soldiers—went to war.”

Because so few of us have served—or even know anyone who has served—since 9/11, we have to look to the media to inform us about veterans and military service. The problem, of course, is that the media often traffics in tragedy and has a tendency to paint veterans with one of three broad brushes. “One story,” writes veteran David Eisler, “is about healthy, hard-working, disciplined, well-trained and experienced veterans who would be an asset to any business or organization. The other tells of broken, disabled, traumatized veterans who have physical and behavioral health issues and require constant care and supervision.” The third story, I would add, portrays veterans as dangerous, “ticking time bombs.” In the wake of the Fort Hood shooting in April 2014, which left three dead and sixteen wounded at the hands of a “battle-scarred” soldier, for example, some media outlets, unwittingly or not, portrayed veterans as potentially violent and maladjusted. Some accounts even claimed—without citation—that the effects of post-traumatic stress “can range from temporary readjustment problems to suicide and murder, both of which have reached alarming levels among soldiers returning from duty.”

To be fair, these three narratives do have some basis in reality. Some veterans are indeed heroes in the truest sense of the word. These men and women have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and other awards for bravery and conspicuous gallantry, or have survived battles of overwhelming odds. Other veterans have returned home debilitated sufferers of traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress. Depending on which studies you read, anywhere from 11 to 30 percent of veterans who served overseas claim to experience post-traumatic stress.

That may sound like a lot, but it's hardly a majority—certainly not enough to justify the impulse so many civilians have to inquire about veterans' mental health. At the same time, some veterans have fallen through the cracks and ended up addicted to alcohol or drugs, jobless, or living on the street. Sadly, it is also true that some come home and commit violent acts of aggression or choose suicide over life.

The comparably humdrum tales of veterans returning home, going to school, getting a job, and trying to make something of themselves simply aren't tragic or inspiring enough to garner much front-page attention.

The problem with many of the stories that do make the papers, however, is that they emphasize three equally useless messages that for many serve as representative of all veterans: (1) that veterans belong on a pedestal, (2) that they are troubled and need our sympathy, or (3) that they need to be feared. For those with no direct connection to the military, the competing sensationalist narratives we are spoon-fed present a seemingly unsolvable paradox that unfortunately widens the gap between the military and the civilian world. The truth, of course, is more complicated than that.

For those who haven't ever served, the gap between the military and civilians can be easily ignored. For those who have served, the military-civilian divide is everywhere and affects how veterans are able to relate to their families, their classmates and coworkers, and their communities. In contrast to past generations of veterans, many of whom were civilians drafted into service, all 2.6 million who served in Iraq and Afghanistan chose their path. While more than half of World War II veterans felt bitter because their wartime service set them back from their civilian peers, our current generation of veterans has internalized their distinction from the rest of society. They are the 1

percent, and they see that difference as a mark of honor. According to one recent poll conducted by *The Washington Post*, of the more than 2.6 million men and women who deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan, 90 percent said they would still have joined, even after considering all they now know about war and military service.

At the same time, however, my students realize that being alienated from the people they protected will only make their transition more difficult than it needs to be. That's why, we believe, the onus is on veterans to tell their stories—to help bridge the divide. For this edited collection, I asked my students to write about themselves and what they have experienced. I asked them to help you, the reader, better understand what it's actually like to be in the military, to go to war, and to come home. With thoughtfulness, humor, and honesty, some students have chosen to relive for you some of the worst memories of their lives and expose their trauma to the light of day. Others have taken a more academic approach, using research and other veterans' perspectives to help illustrate common issues veterans of all generations have had to confront. Still others have decided to tell you stories of what it means to serve, things they think you should know. As you will see, some feel they had important roles to play in the Global War on Terror. Others feel they mattered little. Some miss the simplicity and fulfillment of combat, while others never saw combat or saw enough to know they don't ever want to go back. All have made themselves vulnerable in the hopes that you'll respond with empathy and respect.

Despite their initial reluctance, my students have taken the initiative to help bridge the gap that divides them from those they fought to protect. In telling their varied and important stories, they reveal the common humanity we all share. Above all else, they realize that if they never tell

their stories, we as a society will continue to see them as incomplete stereotypes—heroes or victims or monsters. What they want instead is for us to see them for who they really are—truly diverse individuals who made great personal sacrifices in good faith.

THE FIRES THAT MOLD MEN INTO WEAPONS

By Chase Vuchetich

“I want you guys to understand.” He stared at the wall as the lights on our headlamps flickered. “You might have to kill women and children.... Can you do *that*?” His fire was out; even with the light on his face, his eyes were black as if there was no soul left inside. He was twenty-one years old. His clothes were filthy and tattered. Although he couldn’t grow much more than a ratty mustache, he looked like an old man, tired and beaten down. We sat in a room that would soon be home for some of us, and would soon be left behind by others. Those who had called this place home for the past several months were finally going home, and they were trying to give us any advice they could think of to keep us alive. The only lighting was from the headlamps we wore. I stared into his still black eyes. Seconds passed, though it felt like hours, as we searched for the words to respond. Now we understood the place we were in. We would not be killing uniformed soldiers or even some simple “towel heads,” as your common redneck fuck-head might say. We would be trying to kill an ideal in the bloodiest place of a country pumped full of drug money harvested from its own ground. Those we were replacing left the next day, but I wondered that night if they would really ever leave. Would I?

We come from small towns hidden in the hills, in the snow, or in the red haze of the desert. We come from large cities that spread like a disease across the country. Every place has a different story with the same plot. Everyone wants to leave these towns, but most of the time the military is the only way out.

I was a Navy brat, but only for the first couple of years of my life. I was born in Oak Harbor, Washington in 1991. At age three we moved to my Dad's hometown, Park Falls, Wisconsin. I would start and finish school there. I noticed something about that town as my class got smaller and my friends moved away. Every time someone got the opportunity to leave, they took it and almost never came back. Several of my friends decided to join the military.

I played football and wrestled through most of school. I learned discipline, respect for authority, teamwork, leadership, and what it meant to stick up for brothers. I was a normal kid, except for one thing: I had a fire burning inside me. My retired Navy parents had laid the wood in the pit. On September 11, 2001, I was ten years old, sitting in my homeroom class when another teacher came bursting in saying something about the World Trade Centers. We watched it on the news in our small classroom. Someone had just poured gasoline on my pile of wood.

At the beginning of my junior year, I was having some difficulty deciding what I wanted to do with my life; I still am. At first, I thought that I wanted to be an Apache gunship pilot in the Army. We went to a nearby high school for what they called a "college day." There were booths set up from schools all over the state. I was in luck, though—the recruiters were there, too. I immediately went to the Army recruiter. He stood there in his Army Combat Uniform (ACUs) with pens on his sleeves. I didn't understand at that moment how trashy that looked. I spent ten minutes watching him hit on girls while ignoring me before I finally got pissed and walked away. As I walked down the aisle of tables that were set up, I noticed the Marine Corps recruiter.

He stood there straight and proud in his dress blues. No one was talking to him. It was like there was a bubble around him, preventing all but a select few from seeing him. Being from a Navy family, I was hesitant to talk to

him, but I approached him anyway. It took maybe two minutes, and I had the utmost respect for this man. His tone was stern but welcoming. He wasn't pushy; there was no sales pitch. He was just there to answer my questions, and after a while we just shot the shit. I was hooked.

He had just lit the match. I went home and broke the news to my parents that their son was going to be a Marine. They were shocked and made me promise to talk to all the recruiters. I did but never took them seriously. The Air Force guy who showed up to my house was fat and wearing khakis and a polo shirt. I saw him and thought, *Seriously!*? Although his command presence was weak and he lacked professionalism, he piqued my interest when he started talking about Pararescue. He did not, however, understand them or what they did. I knew after talking to him that I was going to be a Marine, though I didn't know what job I wanted to do.

I thought my Marine recruiter was a pretty kick-ass guy, so I thought maybe I would serve in K9 Military Police like him. Then I thought I might be a diesel mechanic. Both of these jobs would set me up for careers after the Marine Corps. But then I looked at my strengths and what I liked to do. I was an athlete, always have been. I needed to do something physical. I couldn't possibly fly a desk. The monotony would kill me. I was also an excellent shot. My first memory is sitting next to my dad at his reloading bench, where he would make ammunition and listen to George Thorogood and the Destroyers' "Bad to the Bone." By age five I had my own single shot, bolt action, .22 caliber rifle with peep sights. I was lethal with that rifle; no soda cans survived the day. Looking back, it's as if my childhood was that of a warrior class all along.

It became very clear to me one day that I needed to be an infantryman. Why wouldn't I be? I wanted to be successful, and that was the best way to do it. I told my

parents a couple days before my recruiter came over with the paperwork. It was not easy for them to accept, but they knew I was doing what I really wanted, and they couldn't change that.

After passing my physical, I was officially enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. Less than a year later, I shipped out to San Diego for recruit training. Although being heavily intoxicated and having not slept at all the night before, I was ready to go! Boot camp was a breeze for me. My high school football and wrestling coaches were hard-asses, so the physical aspect of training was a cakewalk. It was harder to be away from family and friends for the first time more than anything. I graduated as a private first class the day before Halloween and was recognized for being the company high shooter in rifle qualification. After coming home on leave and realizing my ex-girlfriend had cheated on me, I was ready for the School of Infantry (SOI).

I arrived and immediately thought I was in hell. Boot camp was easy by comparison. If you did what you were told, no one screwed with you. SOI was all about getting you out of that mindset. Now we were learning how to properly and safely employ weapon systems and to shoot, move, and communicate with each other. It was winter in California while I was there, so all the rain and cold just made me miserable. I made some lifelong friends at SOI, some of whom I'd be with in my new unit.

"What's your rifle qual score and PFT?" The platoon sergeants and squad leaders were having themselves a draft. If you could shoot and run fast, they could use you. We stood with our backs to a wall and waited to be picked. I was picked second by a monster of a Marine based off my stunning good looks; that's what he said at least. I was to be in 1st Platoon Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. I was put into a barracks room with another kid from Wisconsin. After dragging our sea bags to the