



Journal of Veterans Studies

Review by Michael Dimmick

Veterans Portrait Project

Stacy Pearsall | www.veteransportraitproject.com

In 2007, after suffering an Improvised Explosive Device attack in Iraq while serving in the First Combat Camera Squadron, Stacy Pearsall spent countless hours in VA hospitals and waiting rooms on temporary retirement with multiple generations of veterans whose service included deployment in every branch of the armed services, from World War II up through Operation Iraqi Freedom. Unable to continue to serve in the military, and entranced by the narratives veterans shared with her at the VA, Pearsall found a new way to serve by turning her camera lens upon the veterans she had spoken with, and after taking her first portrait in 2008, the Veterans Portrait Project (VPP) was born.

The Veterans Portrait Project archive includes over 7,500 black and white portraits, taken in 85 cities in 30 different states. The website's homepage offers an introduction to the project and 237 of Pearsall's veteran portraits selected from across the range of cities and states where she has photographed veterans. The selected portraits provide a manageable, accessible, virtual archive of the project that speaks to Pearsall's intent "to share the unique stories of military veterans and honor their service in a unique, creative way." Begun "as an emotionally cathartic, physically healing tool," Pearsall says, "My goal is to capture portraits of veterans in every state and province from which the United States Department of Defense recruits." In a short video about the VPP, Pearsall (2016) offers a more precise purpose for the portraits:

It was an opportunity for me to give back to my fellow veteran community while also thanking them for their service, and I think that it is essential that we highlight their individual service because more often than not veterans are lumped into this one big great community when each and every one of them have an extraordinary individual story. ("Veterans Portrait Project," 2016, 2:38-2:55)

Bringing together the idea of service and individual narratives, as Pearsall suggests, the VPP has a pedagogical purpose in trying to disrupt the popular representation of veterans as a homogenous group and to provide a forum for veterans to break the silence around their experience. In collaboration with Pearsall, veterans narrate their own story through portraiture, video, speaking engagements, and traveling exhibitions. The VPP adds to other efforts like the *Veterans Writing Project* and *WAR ★ INK* [recently reviewed in *Journal of Veterans Studies* (Heilig, 2018)], to provide a forum for veterans to tell their stories as both cathartic process and as an effort to educate civilians about veterans' service through individual narratives. The Veterans Writing Project (2018) mission statement notes that "we believe that every veteran has a story. But we know that some of us need a little help telling that story" (What We Do). Likewise, *WAR ★ INK* reminds us:

Those who have returned pay other costs. They struggle to process their wartime experience, recover from profound losses, and reintegrate into civilian life. War Ink emerged out of a need to recognize veterans' service and sacrifices and to bridge the divide between the veterans and civilian communities. (Honoring and Understanding Our Veterans, 2014)

Like these other initiatives, VPP takes as a given that over time a broad range of the citizenry has served, motivated by reasons varying from a desire to defend the nation to a desire to get out of town, and that, despite the accolades and appreciation, particularly after Desert Storm, much of that experience remains either inaccessible or simply absent from the national public discussion about veterans. Aimed at a national audience of civilians, service members, and veterans alike, the VPP's use of portraiture provides another mode by which veterans' service, individuality, and stories can be honored and brought to the public. The website highlights this effort to bring veterans' stories to the public by foregrounding the portraits, but in the sub-pages of the site, Pearsall also maps out how veterans and civilians can participate in her "new mission" by arranging for a portrait session and detailing how a venue can sponsor a curated exhibition, bringing these portraits out of the digital realm and into local communities.

Beneath Pearsall's introduction to the project, the audience can browse the selected 237 portraits in a gallery view or by clicking through to view individual portraits. Shot in high contrast black and white, the portraits employ many of the stylistic hall marks of the genre. The veterans are photographed straight on with the focus on either the face, torso, or full body; are posed in profile, facing the camera, or at an angle between; are standing, sitting down, or leaning in on a prop they have chosen (a bicycle, for example); are set before a white backdrop that can be lit to draw out various shades of gray and black for emphasis and mood.

While the choices are eminently practical (Pearsall usually shoots multiple veterans at any event, so working within these constraints allows her to quickly take a series of shots for the veteran to choose from), they provide a relatively flexible blank canvas for the veterans to take center stage, choosing how to compose and tell their story through the portrait. Pearsall's use of these choices is rather effective. Whether shot in profile, close up, or at a distance, each of the portraits offers a distinctive way of highlighting the individual and draws to the forefront something about their personality and how their service shaped, or continues to shape their lives, honoring them not only as veterans "lumped into this one big great community," but as humans. In the process of shooting the portrait, Pearsall is obviously making a strong connection with subjects. The expressive moments of humor, joy, meditation, somber reflection, and tribute suggests the subjects have found shared ground with Pearsall as veterans joined by their history of service; their relationship in this common ground, in turn, invites the viewer in, to listen, to find their own common ground with the story the veteran has to tell.

Traditionally, the portrait genre has been used to pay tribute, to reflect the values of a culture or a person's place within that culture, to document history, to highlight or breakdown stereotypes, and yes, in each of these, to tell the story of the subject. Pearsall and the veterans deftly take up this narrative tradition in the portraits. The portrait of Retired Colonel Sharon A. Singleton draws on the formality of portraiture. Given the formalism and hierarchical command structure of the military, a profile shot seems particularly useful for conveying the distance and respect accorded rank in the military. Singleton's portrait does just that. Shot in profile against a stark white background, the front lighting captures a strict and crisp contrast between her service blue and insignia, marking the formality of her rank. However, she makes the portrait her own by turning her head slightly and turning her eyes upward so that the side lighting captures the contours of her face, drawing the viewer in, past the uniform, to reflect on the future she seems to be considering. In these small details, she acknowledges her fifteen years of service and projects a future that honors her service.

By contrast, many of the portraits draw on these formal conventions to draw attention to the personality behind the uniform. The portrait of Retired Colonel Sankaran S. Babu, M.D., illustrates how veterans adapt these portrait traditions to telling their own story. Like Singleton, Babu, is shown in a torso profile shot against a blown out white background that draws attention to the figural

foreground of the veteran in his service uniform and garrison cap. Having retired in 1994 before the beret replaced the garrison cap, the inclusion here effectively marks his time of service. In contrast to Singleton's portrait, Babu has turned his head to face the camera and holds his jacket draped over his shoulder. The side lighting lends a spark to his eyes and emphasizes his open-mouth smile, as if he were photographed in the middle of a joking conversation with a colleague, a decidedly human moment.

Though these moments of unscripted emotion and camaraderie are evident throughout the portraits, the portraits also allow veterans to grapple with the wounds of war and ask the viewer to do the same in negotiating their presumptions about the veteran "damaged" by war. For example, Retired Captain Johnny T. Clack, is photographed in a mid-range shot, posed at an angle to the camera in a wheelchair, wearing a polo shirt and brace. Having lost three limbs during an RPG attack in Vietnam, he sits upright, his remaining arm in the foreground of the photo. He has raised his head and closed his eyes, as though in some moment of reverie or revelation. The chiaroscuro effect of the lighting sets the background in shadows, while light seems to radiate from his body. Further complicating viewers' assumptions about how veterans feel, on Clack's polo shirt, an American eagle flies in front of an American flag, offering a strong, if not unwavering affirmation of national pride. There is no simple resolution to the moment; rather, it calls the viewer to linger in this moment, to let the veteran speak his piece in suggesting the wounds of war do not define the veteran.

The portrait of SPC. Andrew Hanson employs a similar visual design. Shot using a chiaroscuro lighting effect, Hanson is posed at an angle sitting on a chair wearing shorts and a t-shirt. From this angle, his prosthetic legs are clearly visible and he is looking down where he has raised his shirt sleeve to show his shoulder tattoo of a POW MIA flag and the tagline "You are Not Forgotten." The chiaroscuro effect is particularly effective here, as his torso and face are a mixture of shadow and light; the light casts one side of his face in shadow, while sharply defining his face on the other in a visual echo of the black and white design of the POW MIA flag. The prosthetic legs remind us of his own wounds, while the memorial flag reminds the viewer that there are others not fortunate enough to be sitting here. The shadowy division on his face suggests that the mental work of memory and forgetting, of living with wounds and the loss of fellow servicemembers is not easily handled, but moreover, that it should not be. Here again, there is no simple response, but the choice to shoot the portrait from a greater distance separates the viewer from the person, compelling us to reflect on the story he wants us to hear. Where the photos of Singleton and Babu use bright lighting and fairly direct and highly individualized narratives affirming their personality, character, and service time; here, the stories challenge the viewer, asking that they think further about what they mean when they conceptualize "the veteran," and asking them to consider service, memorialization, sacrifice, and the effects of war in more complex ways.

The enlarged photographs of the individual portraits can be viewed alone or alongside information about the veteran. Most portraits include in list form, the veteran's name, branch, rank, dates of service, role, deployment, and the location and date of the portrait setting. While many of the photos are otherwise unaccompanied by personal narratives, select portraits offer a supplementary narrative, largely in third person, detailing subjects ranging from a memorable moment in their service career, to a brief glimpse into what they are doing now, to a difficult meditation on the consequences of war.

Henry "Duke" Boswell's narrative recounts being struck by a mortar during the Korean war and waking up to the doctor's exclamation that "you're the only soldier with a wound to all FIVE appendages!" In the narrative accompanying Ronald R. Swickley's portrait playing a guitar, we are told that though he is now "most known for his fierce guitar riffs and signature long hair," he once served as an Abrams tank commander during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Other narratives offer a

more somber reflection on life after service. The narrative accompanying Andrew Hanson's portrait discussed above, tells us Hanson, "prefers a fishing rod as his weapon of choice these days. After serving in the Army for six years, Andrew opted to go back home to better take advantage of the outdoors and nature his hometown had to offer" (Pearsall, 2018). In each instance, the veterans' service looms over the brief narratives, providing here, a lighthearted anecdote turning trauma into humor; there, the playful assertion of a new identity; and, elsewhere, a more spectral reminder of the way veterans carry their service with them after returning to civilian life. The stories, like the portraits, remind us of the diversity of military experience, while calling us to consider the very human effort of carrying that experience into a return to civilian life.

Though the central appeal of the project and website is, of course, the portraits themselves, the site offers a far fuller engagement with the scope, relevance, and usability of the project. Along with the featured archive of portraits on the homepage, the site provides a navigation menu directing visitors to a GoFundMe page for the VPP. The linked overview of the VPP includes subpages dedicated to a schedule of VPP events, the VPP Blog, information on how to host and exhibit the VPP, and, most importantly, to a more expansive collection of all the VPP Galleries, sorted by city and date. Along with these, the navigation menu links to a page about Pearsall and a page highlighting Pearsall's photography work more generally.

Included on her photography page are 150-plus linked galleries with a thumbnail portal to the galleries. There are links to Pearsall's advertising work for the military and some of her combat photo journalism from her time serving; there are also thumbnail portals to each of the portrait sessions accessible in the previously mentioned list of dates and cities. While the two separate access points to the portrait galleries may seem like overkill, they offer different ways for the audience to find their way into the galleries. Visitors to the site can easily search the list of dates and cities to find a specific location, while the thumbnail portals invite a consideration of the veterans themselves. Admittedly, the site design could use some work in directing visitors to the full collection of galleries, by including an option on the galleries page to view the collection of galleries in list form or as thumbnail portals.

Nonetheless, each of these subpages complements the public and community minded mission of the portrait project in interesting ways. For example, while seemingly little more than a fundraising plea (and to be fair, that is what it is), browsing the GoFundMe page comments section offers a sense of the community reception of the project. Civilians and veterans alike thank Pearson for her work, offer to help, testify to the experience of being photographed, inquire about how to nominate other veterans for a portrait, and propose cities where she would find substantial veteran populations. If the VPP has a pedagogical bent, here we see how Pearsall's "new mission" is taken up by her audience. Given the thorough and practical discussion of how to set up portrait sessions and arrange for a curated exhibition on the "Host the VPP" and "Exhibit the VPP" subpages, respectively, the enthusiasm and support illustrates not only a public investment in the project, but a continued desire to expand the work.

Perhaps the most relevant complement to the main work of the portraits can be found in the VPP Blog and the "About the Veteran Portrait Project" subpages. In the blog, Pearsall provides updates on the VPP, highlights featured veterans, discusses public recognition of the VPP, and covers collaborations with other organizations doing work with veterans. The blog offers a usable forum for continuing the discussion of veterans in America.

In an echo of the homepage, "About the Veteran Portrait Project" revisits the origins of the VPP, but includes a series of videos created in collaboration with USAA that extend the pedagogical mission of the project by offering personal testimony to the origins of the project and discussing key themes guiding the conceptualization of the project. There are videos initiating a discussion about "Veterans' Common Bonds," "Generations of Service," "Veterans' Sacrifice," and, in the linked

YouTube Site (though curiously missing from the “About” page), a reflection on Veterans Day. These thematically focused videos extend the very conversations Pearsall imagines the project serving. By providing a ground for the discussion, these key concepts help control the kinds of questions the public should bear in mind as they do the work of listening to portrait narratives.

If there is a downside to the virtual archive of the VPP, it may well be the enormous number of portraits included on the homepage and the galleries in the sub-pages. The very traits that make the project so rich—the highly stylized use of the portrait tradition in high contrast black and white and the accompanying service information and occasional narratives about each veteran to present the unique and individual story of the veterans—can be overwhelming. Whether browsing hundreds of the archive’s portraits in the gallery view, or clicking through the individual portraits, the aesthetic consistency risks losing the audience’s attention to the individual, humanized portraits. However, this is also a pointed reminder that the project’s circulation in traveling exhibitions and accompanying speaking events, provides a more manageable, direct, social engagement with a representative, even, potentially, localized selection of the actual portraits. If this is a problem, it is certainly a good one to have, as the depth and stable accessibility of the archive bears repeated visits. The carefully curated selection of images on the homepage provides an easy way to drill down into the more than 100 linked galleries in the subpages.

References

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Michael Dimmick

Assistant Professor

University of Houston-Downtown

dimmickm@uhd.edu