

## **“A Story Worth Telling”: Sharing Stories and Impacting Lives in the Veterans’ Book Group Project at Fort Benning**

**Paige Paquette,**  
*with MAJ Adam  
Anderson, SGT La  
Toya Burnette, SGT  
JeQuetta Canady,  
Specialist E4 Brandon  
Carr, SGT First Class  
Nathaniel Coakley,  
Ret., and Staff  
Sergeant Yolanda  
Teamer*

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*In the fall of 2014, Troy University partnered with the Alabama Humanities Foundation, working in conjunction with the Maine Humanities Council, to provide a veterans’ reading group to wounded warriors at the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Benning, GA. The program, Story Swap: Literature and the Veteran Experience, consisted of five, ten-week sessions. During weekly meetings, veterans came together to share dinner and swap stories. While reading and discussing short stories, novels, poetry, essays, and art, the veterans learned much about each other and themselves. In this article, Paige Paquette, an assistant professor of English and the group facilitator, will discuss her involvement in the planning and implementation of the program. Six of the participating veterans will share their experiences in a literary program that allowed them to realize they all have a story worth telling.*

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*Everyone has a story. Some stories have been written, some have been told, and some are just waiting on the opportunity.*

—Paige Paquette

In 2014, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) tasked the Maine Humanities Council (MHF) to work with their counterparts across the United States to develop veterans' book groups. The Maine Humanities Foundation's final report on Veterans' Book Group Project listed three main project goals. The first was to "provide a veteran-centered setting and context for veterans to connect with one another, build relationships, and share experiences." The second was to "create an opportunity for veterans to give a voice to and reflect upon issues of particular interest or concern." The third goal was to "engage with materials that will allow veterans to see their own stories as part of a larger human experience, connecting them with others across time" (Sinclair 4). Having four military bases within the footprint of Alabama, the Alabama Humanities Foundation (AHF) was eager to participate in the program; TROY University received a grant from the AHF to start a book group at Fort Benning, an Army base in Georgia. AHF provided initial information, an outline of the Maine Humanities Council's purpose and goals, sample syllabi and other suggestions that were provided by the Maine Humanities Council. The Humanities Councils entrusted most of the planning, reading and implementing to the facilitators.

As an Assistant Professor of English at TROY University and because of several personal connections to the military and a passion for learning, I felt like a reading group with veterans was an excellent opportunity; I applied for one of the AHF grants. I had never facilitated a group such as this so my initial goals were modest: to encourage reading and discussion of various forms of literature; however, I had no idea the program would create an outlet for storytelling and writing through the reading group structure. The book group became a sounding board and community for many of the participants who felt as if their voices were no longer important, re-established a feeling of camaraderie that many soldiers craved, and inspired several of the veterans to continue to use reading, and writing, as ways in which their feelings could be expressed.

After receiving the grant from AHF, I began to plan the veterans' book group program. As previously mentioned, the AHF passed down information from the Maine Humanities Council with

recommended readings and an explanation of the supervisory roles. There were other recommendations, but much of the implementation of the program was left to the team I rallied around me. I chose to recruit participants for the reading group at the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) at Fort Benning. Soldiers and Veterans live at the WTB during times when they receive medical treatment for injuries and ailments. Some of the injuries may not be military related, but many were sustained during combat or training. This battalion is referred to as the “transition” battalion because most soldiers transition back to a unit or out of the Army from this point.

Implementing an outside program on a military base is not always an easy task. As I sought out a way to connect with the veterans at the WTB, I met Nate Coakley, a veteran who worked with soldiers at the Fort Benning Warrior Transition Battalion and served as president of the Fort Benning Wounded Warrior Association. Nate assisted me in acquiring permission from the Battalion Commander to implement the program.

Once I had permission to provide the program to veterans, I developed material for recruiting, a syllabus, and a basic plan for the program. While speaking with Nate, I realized it could be difficult to recruit veterans by advertising a Veterans’ Book Group. The Alabama Humanities Foundation adopted the title *Literature and the Veteran Experience*, but we were worried veterans would not relate to that title. One of the nurse case managers, who helped with recruiting veterans, recommended we call our group *Story Swap*. Our program title became *Story Swap: Literature and the Veteran Experience (LVE)*; however, most of the veterans fondly refer to it as *Story Swap*.

One recommendation from the Maine Humanities Councils’ program was to have a scholar, veteran co-facilitator, and a site coordinator. I felt it would be most beneficial to find veterans to fill both positions. I knew how to select stories and other literary pieces for students, but selecting meaningful literature for soldiers was challenging. After recognizing Nate’s passion for veterans and his position in the WTB, I knew that he must be a part of the implementing of *Story Swap: LVE*. Nate wore many hats in our program: recruiter, site coordinator, and a participant. The recruiter is responsible for providing information

about the program and inviting the veterans to participate. The site coordinator secures the location and assures that it is ready for the meeting each week. Because he was a veteran also, Nate often shared his thoughts about the readings during the meetings.

The veteran co-facilitator of the program served more than thirty years in the United States Army. COL (Ret.) Tom MacGregor was a chaplain for much of his Army career. He both led and counseled many soldiers during his time in the military. He also has three sons, a son-in-law, and a daughter-in-law who are currently serving in the Army. I knew that he was the perfect veteran co-facilitator because he could relate to the veterans, provide expert guidance, and understand the various emotions behind such a tremendous life transition. As the co-facilitator, Tom gave me insight from a veteran's perspective, and he brought wisdom and perspective into the group. During one of the meetings for our first Story Swap: LVE session, we read a story about a soldier returning home. Tom shared that he often provided redeployment training, preparing soldiers to return home from war, while he was in Iraq. Several of the soldiers in the group commented on the value of having that type of training. When Tom realized these men and women had not received the training, he was able to provide them with a brief overview and help them relate the strategies to their current situations.

Our program was designed to meet one night a week for ten weeks, and we repeated the ten-week curriculum five times. Each participating veteran received a notebook with weekly readings and a novel to discuss during the last week of the session. The AHF grant monies also funded a light dinner each week. Food is always a selling point, especially since most of those attending lived in the barracks. The first iteration of Story Swap averaged six veterans per meeting. By our fourth iteration, we were averaging twelve to fifteen veterans. We had veterans who were active-duty, reserves, National Guard, and retired. After the first session, the AHF requested I try to recruit at least eight to ten veterans in the program per session. Because many of these veterans had medical appointments and health issues, it was sometimes difficult, and stressful, assuring that we had a strong representation in the meetings. However, as the veterans began to see value in the program, they began to take ownership,

and they recruited others in the WTB to join Story Swap. One of the many unpredicted successes of the program was that we had veterans ranked Private to Colonel. During the first meeting, the soldiers set the precedent that there was no “rank” during our meetings, so enlisted veterans spoke freely to and among officer veterans.

A typical meeting started with a light dinner and conversation, and then the group moved into a time of literary discussion, which typically moved to life discussions. Throughout our sessions, we read a variety of short stories, poems, and novels. There were several poems and short stories that became favorites and, even though many of the same veterans participated in multiple sessions, these literary pieces were popular each time the participants read and discussed them. A few of the favorite poems were “We Wear a Mask” by Paul Dunbar, “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost, and “There’s a Whole in My Sidewalk” by Portia Nelson. The poems stimulated discussion as to how they related to the veterans’ lives, and they also inspired several of the veterans to write their own poetry and share it with the group. Of course, the veterans enjoyed many of the short stories from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. They also appreciated short stories and essays such as “Three Questions” by Leo Tolstoy, “The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant, and “I Miss Iraq, I Miss My Gun, I Miss My War” by Brian Mockenhaupt. The books and novels we read included *Of Mice and Men*, *The Forever War*, and *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life that Follows*. Of all the novels we read, the one which seemed to be most enjoyable to the veterans was *Certain Jeopardy*, written by Jeff Struecker, a retired Army Chaplain whose personal story is featured in the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*. This is the first in a series of his military novels. The novel shares the adventures of a team of soldiers, a special unit, as they travel across the world in a moment’s notice to rescue and protect others in harm’s way. After the veterans completed the novel, Jeff came to discuss it with them and share his thought process while writing.

Because this program was in its initial implementation, I felt as if I were a first-year teacher in many ways. I did not know what to expect, so I focused on the goals provided by the Maine Humanities Council. I wanted the veterans to read the literature I selected and to discuss it during our times together. Even that was more of a challenge than I

anticipated. Some of the veterans had injuries that made it difficult for them to read or comprehend. There were others who were busy with various appointments. Still others wanted to just enjoy dinner and the conversation without doing much reading. I learned that shorter stories, essays, and poetry made it more likely that the veterans would read the material prior to coming to the meetings. There were times in the different sessions I heard comments that told me the veterans who weren't reading had started to do so. As time went on, most of the veterans began to read the literary pieces I provided for the week because they found value in sharing their thoughts based more upon their experiences with the pieces we were discussing.

Since much of my English educational background is in writing, I hoped I would be able to incorporate writing into the program. Even though I often suggested and encouraged writing within the Story Swap sessions, I did not include writing in the curriculum because it was not part of the Maine Humanities' Council's project. In the last session, however, I started seeing small pieces of writing emerge. On two separate occasions, both Nate and I stepped out of our comfort zones and shared poetry we had written. Initially, we allowed the veterans to read and discuss our work without revealing ourselves as the authors. Then, after sharing that we were the authors of the poems, many of the veterans started to talk about stepping out of their own comfort zones by writing and described how they began journaling their thoughts, feelings, and plans for the future. A few weeks later, one of the veterans sent a poem to share with the group when we next met. She also shared that she hopes to write a book about her health journey.

In future sessions with veterans and any other people in the group with whom I interact, I will provide journals at the beginning of the program and encourage each participant to take their thoughts, feelings, and stories and use them to write poems and narratives. In the past, we read the literary pieces and discussed their significance to each reader. In addition to this aspect of the program, I will slowly introduce the participants to writing poetry, essays, and short stories. Even the youngest of these veterans had wisdom and experience he or she could share with the literary community. It is important to develop ways to build their confidence to do so. I will determine ways

in which I can transfer their enthusiasm for discussing the reading to writing about their own journeys and battles they face.

Although I can share the details of the program as the developer and facilitator of the Story Swap: Literature and the Veteran Experience program at Fort Benning, the true results of any program must come from the participants. To help veterans in the group tell the story of the project, I composed and distributed a series of questions relating to their military careers, their introduction to Story Swap, experiences they have had in the program, and outcomes (including introducing writing into their lives). I asked them to use my questions as a springboard to construct individual narratives about their experiences in the program. I offer their responses here in order to provide insight into the impact of Story Swap on its individual participants.

## **MAJ ADAM ANDERSON**

As a military brat, a husband, a father of five kids, and a retired, commissioned officer in the military for more than twenty-two years, I've experienced the military from many angles. I have served in the U.S. Army National Guard, U.S. Army Reserves, and the U.S. Army as an active duty soldier. I have held many titles such as Platoon Leader, Executive Officer, Detachment Commander, and Company Commander. I have deployed twice to Afghanistan (2006-2007 and 2013-2014). However, I had never really encountered an opportunity to share about my experiences in a meaningful way until I started attending Story Swap.

In 2014, I found myself at the Warrior Training Battalion (WTB) at Fort Benning, GA. The sense of being a part of something that was meaningful, purposeful, and bigger than I had been was what drove me in my military career, and now I was trying to determine what my future would be. After about a year at the WTB, my nurse case manager told me I should go to Story Swap. I found myself thinking like one of my kids, "I'm going to go, but that doesn't mean I will like it." I was surprised the first night at how much I enjoyed the discussion. I immediately felt welcome and included. I saw merit in

the program because it helped me to put things into perspective and open myself up to differing ideas and opinions.

In the military, you do not always have the opportunity to disagree, but in Story Swap meetings we were able to debate the merits and authors' intent in a friendly environment. Veterans were required to leave their ranks at the door, so I had the opportunity to interact with soldiers of all ranks, from PFC to COL. As other Story Swap members shared their personal stories, I was able to get to know others and establish friendships with many of them. I believe sharing my own story opened doors for me to use my experiences to help several of the other soldiers in the group.

At one meeting, there was a young Soldier who had started attending a couple of weeks prior, mainly for the free food and because his buddy was there. He had remained more of an observer than a participant. He listened but had not engaged, often keeping his head down as he listened. That night, we seemed to have come to a general consensus as to what we thought the story was about when this young man looked up and said, "I don't agree." Paige tilted her head to the side, smiled at him, and asked him what he was thinking. The group listened, validated, and discussed his thoughts. Although it was a challenging conversation, it was inclusive and supportive, and it started him on the path to becoming one of the more vocal members of the group.

I retired out of the Army during my time in Story Swap. This program helped me work through the honest realization that I was leaving the Army for good, and this would be the end of my Army career. There would be no MAJ Anderson anymore, no authority or responsibility. My Story Swap family, helped me to understand that, while this chapter in my life was over for good, it is not the end of my story. My mission wasn't the Army; the Army was just a mule that I rode for a period of time. I now have the opportunity to use all I learned in the military to make a difference in the lives of others.

## **SGT LA TOYA BURNETTE**

I have been an Army reservist for eight years, having deployed twice to Afghanistan. When I'm not soldiering, I am a LPN. If I have



learned anything in my years, it is that life throws unexpected curve balls at you. When I was injured in Afghanistan, I received orders to go to the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) at Fort Benning. I wanted to come to the WTB, get whatever treatment I needed, and then move on with my career, but I found myself in a place where I didn't even like me. I had only been at the WTB for a few months when an officer in my unit invited me to Story Swap. I found excuses not to go for several weeks, but she continued to invite me. Finally, I came to a Story Swap meeting, and I felt like I had found a place I could belong. It's ironic. I thought I didn't want any friends, yet it was the people in the group that drew me in. I enjoyed spending time with them, listening to their thoughts on the readings, and then sharing my own ideas and opinions. The literary pieces we read in Story Swap gave me a voice and a platform on which I could be me.

I have always enjoyed reading, so I cannot quite understand why I didn't really read the literary pieces when I first started attending. As I continued to recognize this "voice" that I was developing, I realized that I could share more and provide more input if I read everything we were going to discuss. The short stories and poems broadened my horizons. I can look into the literary pieces and put myself in the shoes of the characters, authors, or speakers in the work. I found myself thinking, "This is how it made me feel" or "This is how I would feel if this happened to me." Participating in this group reminded me of my love for poetry, and I even developed an appreciation for art. I never would have considered that I would be able to look at a picture to find meaning in it, place myself in the picture, or listen to others to hear their perspectives.

I remember one particularly lively discussion around the essay, "The Worst Day of My Life is now New York's Hottest Tourist Attraction" by Steve Kandell. As we began talking about the essay, we all referred back to where we were on 9-11. Many of us decided that 9-11 was one of the main reasons we joined the Army. We also realized that, even though we all witnessed the same day in history, we each had a different experience, memory, and outcome from the tragedy. That is one of the author's points in the essay. He saw the 9-11 Museum as a reminder that his sister's body was never recovered from the World Trade Center, while others had a different experience and

understanding. As he sat in a room set aside for those who were still missing remains from their loved ones, he discussed how others just did not understand the conflicting feelings he had. All of the members of the Story Swap group could relate to that notion as well. Many of us do not have visible scars. Our scars are hidden, emotional rather than physical. People with whom we associate, even other soldiers, do not understand exactly how we feel, what we think, or what burdens we carry. So it would be even more difficult for civilians to understand...even our biological families.

Story Swap has changed my life. I have been encouraged to read more, and I have especially been inspired to write. In the past, I would often let lesson-learning or memorable moments pass by, virtually unnoticed. Now, I stop and write about them. I believe a pen is a powerful weapon I can use to protect me in my day-to-day living. Since I have been at the WTB, I have not felt the constant support from others I felt when I was deployed anywhere else other than Story Swap. Just this past year, when I lost my grandmother to whom I was very close, I found my birth certificate and learned my biological father's name. I had an opportunity to meet my father for the first time. Discussing the readings and re-establishing my "voice" gave me the confidence to connect with an entire family I did not know existed and had never met. Throughout the whole journey of loss and discovery, my Story Swap family walked alongside me.

Through reading and discussing literature, Story Swap has provided a place where I could share my thoughts and experiences and learn from others. I have come from a place of self-inflicted isolation to one in which I participate in everything: Story Swap, guitar lessons, singing performances, deep sea fishing excursions, and so much more. As the poem, "The Mask" showed us, we do not have to wear a mask all of the time. I found that Story Swap was a place where I could come, scarred and wounded, and be inspired to become more than I ever dreamed I could be.

## **SGT JEQUETTA CANADY**

After seven and a half years in the Army as a military analyst, I never anticipated I would spend almost two years of my life at the WTB. My immediate family, including my husband and three children, live less

than an hour from Fort Benning, but during the week, it seemed like they could have been on another continent. I truly believe the Lord knew I needed the type of supportive family Story Swap provided.

I am the only veteran, other than Nate, to have participated in all five, ten-week sessions because I happened to be in the right place at the right time the first night the program started. As I walked through the Warrior Training Battalion (WTB) building the first night of Story Swap, my nurse case manager grabbed me and told me I should go into the meeting. Because I was new to the WTB, I really did not know anyone yet. At the meeting, I quickly realized I was the only female veteran in the room. Although I was really quiet the first session, I recognized this was the opportunity for me to be a part of something important while I was at the WTB. I had been assigned to the WTB to have surgery, so I was focused on having that done, healing, and returning to my unit. As I continued to attend Story Swap meetings, I started to feel a sense of freedom and relaxation I was not finding anywhere else. During the first session, Story Swap helped me to focus more on my surroundings, people, reading opportunities, and new relationships.

From the beginning, I understood Story Swap was something special. I enjoyed reading and tried to do so whenever I could, but I had never been in a situation where I could hear others' interpretations and share my own. As I heard others share what was sometimes personal information, I started to feel a little more comfortable with the possibility of sharing. It was a bit awkward for me at times, not because of the group make-up or because I did not have anything to share, but I felt as if I had not gone through many of the situations others in the group experienced. I had not been wounded in combat or faced danger in the ways they had. It made me feel as if I could not relate and might not have anything to contribute. However, once I started sharing, I found out how great it felt to be able to express my opinion and to hear others' thoughts in relation to mine.

Near the end of the ten-week session, I received unexpected news. I had an aggressive form of breast cancer, and I would have to begin chemotherapy the next week. My whole world began to spin, but it was my own family and my Story Swap family that encouraged

me as I prepared for a new, fierce battle. I guess I could describe my experiences with Story Swap as those of faith and friendship. In session three, several other ladies joined the group. These ladies provided much support and encouragement throughout my cancer journey. When members of the group said, "If you need anything, let me know. I will do anything to help," they meant it. I had group members stop by to see me after a treatment, bringing me treats and goodies, and both Paige and Nate came and sat with me during a treatment.

It is amazing how something I appreciated because it was a chance to step out of the "real world" and move into a world with a variety of characters, stories, and poems became such a crucial part of my life. On Thursdays after I had a chemo treatment, I did my very best to still attend Story Swap meetings. The literature provided my mind an escape, and the friends there were like a breath of fresh air. It is ironic how things change. When I started coming to Story Swap, I felt like I had not experienced the battles many of the veterans in our group discussed. And now, I realize I have faced my own battle, one to which most of my Story Swap family members cannot relate. They have not given up on trying to understand my battle, and they have fought it with me in any way they can.

One of my favorite pieces we read together was, "The Worst Day of my Life has now Become a New York Tourist Attraction" by Steve Kendall. I have always felt like many people do not understand war, loss, and sacrifice. I recently wrote a poem challenging people to remember that Memorial Day is more about sacrifice than cookouts and swimming. I feel like Kendall truly understands the consequences of evil, war, and sacrifice. This entire essay is a poignant piece, but I believe the culmination of it is when Kendall discusses the gift shop and how everything that happened seems to be packaged up into a "been there, seen that" t-shirt or hoodie. I have made great strides in my cancer journey, but as I continue to walk through the consequences, I realize many times people do not understand or "get it" because of ignorance or maybe apathy. Reading literature and sharing thoughts and opinions with others is a great way to expand one's knowledge and understanding.

I have started reading more literature and other types of writing since I have been involved in Story Swap, and I look at the pieces I read much differently now. I look for how the piece speaks to me and try to determine how it might speak to others. I have become more dedicated to journaling. Paige suggested I journal about my cancer journey, and I used that as an outlet. I will continue to journal as I move on to new phases of life. As I said before, I have written a few poems, and I believe one day I will write my own story in hopes of inspiring someone else who is facing a similar battle. In the Army, we all have a battle buddy. Soldiers never leave their buddies, and they help their buddies when one feels as if he or she cannot continue. Story Swap has provided me with many battle buddies who have walked with me over the last year or so. I know they are always there to help me carry on. Now, that is a story worth telling.

## **SPECIALIST E4 BRANDON CARR**

I served in the U.S. Army Reserves for three years as a Human Resources Specialist. I always longed to be a part of something bigger than myself. Everyone has seen the commercials on t.v. about “being all that you can be,” “being an Army of ONE,” and “being Army Strong,” and even though I knew that those were just catchy slogans, I wanted to be a part of the Army family. Because of circumstances in my life, I chose to serve as a reservist rather than going active duty, so I could serve the people in my community as well as my country. Having enlisted long after 9-11, I knew the chances were good that I would be called up to active duty and deploy, but I was ready to serve.

I received orders to deploy to Afghanistan in 2014. To say I enjoyed my deployment may sound weird to many, but, while I was there fighting, I felt I was able to do my duty and protect others at home. I felt a sense of accomplishment. There was also a closeness I felt with my battle buddy and others in my unit. I had never experienced this type of family feeling with others. My military career came to a screeching halt when I was injured, and I returned to the “old me” by way of the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) at Fort Benning, Georgia.

For seven months, I lived at the WTB while I struggled with my identity and issues. I isolated myself from others. I didn’t want to

recognize where I was in my life or deal with all of the issues my injury brought both physically and emotionally. One day a battalion nurse case manager told me about Story Swap. She told me that there was FREE food, and I'm not sure I heard what else she said after that.

When I first heard about Story Swap, I thought it was going to be a book club. Reading is not on my top-five list of things to do for fun, so I was not sure that I was going to like it. As soon as I arrived, I was hooked. It did not take long for me to realize others attending Story Swap dealt with similar things like I was experiencing. That was the first time that I realized there were others who really wanted to help me, not because it was their job, but because they genuinely cared about me. I would also say that Paige, our facilitator, was another reason I came back. She always maintained a bright outlook in our group conversations and encouraged us to share. I knew she really wanted to hear what I had to say. I will always believe the literature we read and the people I met in Story Swap helped me more than months of therapy.

I must confess I am not really a reader, but I am a talker. If the reading we had was more than just a page or two, let's just say I opted to learn from others. The literature we read each week really did make an impact on my life. I never realized stories written by some dead old guys could speak to me and my life experiences. It was also encouraging to hear how it spoke to others. Many times we would start discussing a story, and then one person's response would fuel another's. I remember the second time I came to a Story Swap evening. I decided this was the week I was going to share my thoughts. I usually struggled with giving my opinions, yet when I did speak, I realized the group embraced my thoughts and made me recognize that, again, I was a part of a family.

My favorite piece of literature we read was "The Mask" by Paul Dunbar. I remember reading poetry in school, but I never allowed it to speak to me. After Paige shared a little about Dunbar's background, I realized he and I had several commonalities. Someone in the group read the poem, and I remember thinking, "YES! This is me." The poem captivated me, and I still think of it regularly. There are many other stories and poems which impacted me during the two sessions

I participated in with Story Swap. I often found myself carrying our conversations back to the barracks after we finished.

Story Swap was, and will always be, a safe-haven for veterans and civilians to come together and explore the mental and emotional effects of the traumatic events in their lives. This program encouraged me to step out of my own darkness and to allow others to walk with me through the process. It helped me see I do not have to wear masks with everyone. I realized life is so much better when you can share your thoughts and opinions with others who understand. I would love to say Story Swap inspired me to become an avid reader, but that would not be true. It did motivate me to write more and to use my writing as an outlet of expression.

I am out of the military now and back at work in my job in human resources. I have no idea where my life will go in the future. I do know Story Swap filled a gap for me when I was trying to make my way back from a world of isolation. Programs like this are crucial in the lives of people who need to know they still matter to the world. I will be forever grateful to those old (and mostly dead) authors, Paige, and TROY University for bringing the brightness back into my darkened world.

### **SGT FIRST CLASS NATHANIEL COAKLEY, RET.**

When I was first introduced to the Literature and the Veteran Experience program, I recognized the value of an opportunity to both introduce veterans to literature and to bring those at the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) into a more intimate community. As a veteran myself, having served twenty-one years and having deployed to Panama, Honduras, Kuwait, and Iraq, I had an appreciation for the Army family and its appeal to many soldiers. With my current position as WTB Staff Operations and Training Specialist, one thing I focus on is resiliency training. I knew that Story Swap had the potential to create a familial atmosphere and assist with recovery and resilience, but I could not have imagined the impact it would have on the participants, myself included.



My official title and role in the Story Swap program was Site Coordinator. I participated somewhat as a co-facilitator, bringing up military-related ideas and concepts of which Paige, the scholar/facilitator, would not be aware. There were many times that I was also just a veteran participant. I often found myself sharing my experiences and discovering new thought patterns. One of my most significant moments in Story Swap was actually during the inaugural ten-week session. After one Thursday evening meeting, Paige and I were walking out together, doing what the military calls an after-action report on the evening. Paige, who had only known me a few weeks, discerned that I was dealing with some heavy issues in my life. She recognized something my co-workers of seven years did not notice. When I say that Story Swap changed my life, it was actually this 30-45 minute talk with Paige that affected me the most. It can be difficult at times for veterans who are dealing with their own issues to work with those at the WTB. That night, I was in a dark, dark place and was on the cusp of losing confidence and hope in myself. Paige's poignant words jolted me and helped me grasp the understanding that I am worthy. I realized that I had been entrusted with the lives of many other soldiers in the organization. I was also reminded of the importance of taking a moment to look into others' eyes and see beyond the masks they wear.

I had not thought much about this concept of wearing masks to cover up what we are really thinking and feeling until we read the poem, "The Mask" by Paul Dunbar. After reading this piece, I was able to relate to it on both a personal and professional level. As a soldier, leader, or parent, it is sometimes necessary to wear a mask to protect others in our care. It has been interesting to see how this poem has spoken differently to me over time based on my changing circumstances. During the second group reading of the poem, Paige shared Dunbar's biographical background with us. I felt as if I understood the poem even more once I realized he was raised in a very different racial environment than most African Americans during that time period. He probably often felt forced to wear a mask to hide the variety of emotions and experiences he faced. As I mentioned earlier, one of the characteristics of the military that has always appealed to me is a sense of family. In retrospect, I realize that there have been times with the Story Swap family when I have been able to remove masks



that I still wear with my own biological family. Removing a mask and being accepted is a powerful feeling.

It is difficult to describe Story Swap, but I characterize the program as an experience where you come together, enjoy fellowship, laugh, and sometimes cry... all without being judged, evaluated, or probed. I am an extrovert; although I am comfortable talking to crowds, it was only during our Story Swap meetings that I was able to open up and share several personal experiences. My participation in Story Swap has motivated me to read more literature, personal essays, and novels. Art has taken on a new meaning since I have learned more about putting myself “in” the picture. I believe the area in which I have been challenged to stretch the most is my writing. I have used poetry to express my thoughts and feelings. It is rewarding to share it with other veterans and see they really “get it.” After five, ten-week sessions of Story Swap, I have come to define the group as a place where your words and views really mean something and can help others see that reading and discussing literature is an important vehicle for self-expression.

## **STAFF SERGEANT YOLANDA TEAMER**

I have spent much of my adult life in the military, twenty-nine years and seven months. I cannot say I have loved every minute of it, but I wouldn't want it any other way. I have worked in human resources as a military reservist, and I am a Juvenile Justice Officer for the State of Florida. I am proud to have contributed to the protection of people here and in harm's way. During my military service, I have been deployed to Bosnia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. I consider it a privilege to have been given the opportunity to serve my country, to lead, teach, and mentor many other young men and women who have answered their nation's call to service.

After Afghanistan I received orders to come to the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) at Fort Benning. I have been here for a year and a half. Up until recently, I thought I was feeling better, so I was expecting to return to my reserve duty status soon. Just a few months ago, I found out I would be retiring instead. It was a tough pill to swallow, and I am thankful to have such a supportive family at

home and my Story Swap family to help me as I transition from the career I have cherished for so long.

I had been at the WTB for about six months when another soldier invited me to come to this reading group called Story Swap. I did not think I would enjoy something like this. I planned to attend one meeting so that the person who invited me would stop asking me to attend. When I arrived at Story Swap, I saw it was a very friendly atmosphere. I found this group to be an opportunity to talk about different issues I might be experiencing, and I realized others were going through many of the same things I was. I never knew reading short stories and poems could be a great catalyst to conversation. I realized early during my time in the group it was much more valuable and interesting to read all of the literary pieces every week. It allowed me an opportunity to contemplate my thoughts and opinions as I read to prepare to articulate them better to the group.

After participating in three, ten-week sessions of the program, I have realized literature has something to offer every reader. An example of this is my favorite poem, "The Mask" by Paul Dunbar. While reading this poem, I realized almost everyone wears a mask; some people wear several of them. Typically, we wear masks to keep people away or to draw others toward themselves. I found myself considering all of the masks I wear. As a soldier, leader, daughter, mother, wife, friend, and employee, I often find I need to put on a different mask. In most of my roles, there are times it is not acceptable to show my true feelings. When we gathered together, all labels and ranks disappeared. We were just people who had thoughts, opinions, dreams, disappointments, and goals.

Many of the participants in Story Swap have become more than just friends; they are my family. Story Swap has shown me the value of reading, and we can usually find a point at which we relate to something we have read. I have not started writing much during my time at the WTB, but I know writing will be an excellent way for me to transition when I retire from the Army. My story is about to change a bit, but I am confident that I can share it with others and, hopefully, make a positive impact in their lives. We all have a story someone needs to hear. We may never write our stories, but we

need to evaluate them and determine how they can benefit others. As veterans, we have dedicated ourselves to positively impacting our country. That does not change because we are no longer in the military. We may start a new chapter, but we should never stop swapping stories and impacting lives.

## **CONCLUSION: PAIGE PAQUETTE**

As I assess the project, I realize that Story Swap: Literature and the Veteran Experience not only met all of the initial goals for the program, but it far exceeded my expectations. It is apparent that Story Swap provided an environment in which veterans connected, built relationships, and shared experiences. Most of my veteran co-writers validated this in their discussions about the program. The word “family” is used often among the Story Swap members, and in the military, that is not a word soldiers use casually. Soldiers assigned to the WTB are all in a state of transition, waiting to determine whether they will continue to serve their countries or find it necessary to alter their career goals. Story Swap provided those veterans attending the group a reason to come out of the barracks and to break out of the isolation that can so easily grip us all during times of uncertainty. The program provided the veterans with an atmosphere in which sharing personal stories was accepted and encouraged. The veterans also experienced, possibly for the first time, the ability to talk about their military experiences openly and freely with others who understood.

Many of the veterans in the group recognized they had a voice. Having worked in a structured environment like the military, the opportunity to speak freely and express personal thoughts might not have been available to these veterans. Although many of the veterans did not know what their futures held at the time, Story Swap allowed them to step out of the “Army of One” mentality, as Brandon shared, and move towards a new place in their lives where they were individuals and were encouraged to think for themselves. Through reading, these veterans discovered that others within the group had similar thoughts and understandings. They also recognized there were authors, poets, writers, and even artists, who had similar experiences and situations.

There were several other discoveries these veterans made beyond my goals for the program. I saw men and women, many much younger than I, discover or re-discover themselves as they related to the literary pieces and the others' thoughts shared within the group. It was in these moments, when they seemed to be most vulnerable, that the others reached out and embraced them. Many times when we face uncertainty, we either run from others or run toward them. I believe the literature drew these men and women together during their uncertain times, and that brought forth the creation of this new family many discussed in their writing.

In their information about the program, the Maine Humanities Council described the veterans' book group concept as one bringing, "diverse people who share a common experience together in a relaxed setting, offering opportunities for reflection, and to be part of a community" (Sinclair 2). These achievements were the beginning of the literary experience for the Story Swap veterans. The participants in the program came because of free food and an opportunity to spend time with others. Many of them admitted that they did not read when they initially came to the meetings. As the participants found they had many commonalities and began to grow closer together as a group, they also started to read more. Most of my co-writers were involved with Story Swap for two or three sessions. I watched them move from the fellowship of others to engaging in their own forms of reflective writing or thinking.

Story Swap brought a group of men and women, who spent most of their days waiting on the Army, appointments, and others' decisions, to a new dynamic in which they were intellectuals who were reading, questioning, debating, and speaking out on their understandings of literature. As each veteran became more aware that he or she each had a story to tell, I began to hear more about writing in journals, poems, and even writing books. Many of the veterans participating in Story Swap have started a new chapter in their lives, one away from the Army, and the reading and writing experiences they have had will travel with them into those new lives. They take with them the stories they heard from other veterans about transition, loss and healing, the memories and friendships they made as they read and discussed literature and some began to share their writing, and the

advice and encouragement they gave each other as they transitioned. Story Swap veterans are also taking a voice, an admiration for reading, and an appreciation for the discoveries they make about life and themselves through writing. Although most of these veterans feel as if their military careers have ended before they should, each has realized the value of sharing their thoughts and experiences in a circle of other veterans. As Jequetta put it, those are definitely “stories worth telling.”

## WORKS CITED

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**Dr. Paige F. Paquette** is an Assistant Professor of English at TROY University. She has taught at TROY for fourteen years. Because TROY is a military friendly university, many of her students are soldiers. She spends much of her own time volunteering on Fort Benning, GA, working with military teens, families, and veterans.

**Adam Anderson** retired as a Major from the United States Army after serving 22 years. He currently works in a federal government position.

**La Toya Burnette** is a Sergeant in the United States Army Reserves. She has served in human resources for 8 years. In her other career, SGT Burnette is a LPN.

**JeQuetta Canady** is a Sergeant in the United States Army Reserves. She has served as an intelligence analyst for 7.5 years. SGT Canady also owns her own business, Canady Global Systems. This company helps new business and entrepreneurs acquire direct access to financing or establish business credit.

**Brandon Carr** served as a Specialist in the United States Army Reserves for 3 years in human resources. He currently works in human resources in Atlanta, GA.

**Nate Coakley** retired as a Sergeant First Class in the United States Army after serving for 21 years. He worked at the Fort Benning Warrior Transition Battalion for 7.5 years and recently started a position as a Training Instructor at the Fort Benning Maneuver Center of Excellence in the Combined Arms Training Development. Nate is also the president of the Fort Benning Wounded Warriors Association.

**Yolanda Teamer** retired as a Staff Sergeant in the United States Army Reserves after serving 29.7 years. She currently works as a juvenile justice officer for the State of Florida.