

## Veterans' Voices Month

Posted on [May 26, 2014](#) by [J. A. Moad II](#)

Last Memorial Day, Sebastian Junger called on Veterans across the nation to go out and tell their stories. He proposed this as a step toward sharing “the moral burden of war”—a means of reaching out to the ninety-nine percent who’ve never put on a uniform. The sentiment was well founded, and after more than a decade of war, the time seemed right, but something was missing. I published a response, acknowledging the importance of this *call to arms*, but also recognizing the inherent complication of getting Vets to break their silence, open up and engage with civilian audiences. This is something new and unfounded in the history of America, after all, an effort to bridge the disconnect between citizens and those we ask to serve and die on our behalf. Sebastian was right, of course, the nation needs to hear what Vets have to say, but the question was how? What would it take for them to share their stories and insights?



Painting by Jason Gunn

Midway into the thirteenth year of this War on Terror, we’re awash in stories about the difficulties faced by Veterans. We’ve become a society inured and exhausted by the longest conflict in our history. It’s understandable, of course. For years we listened to news reports of IEDs, suicide bombers, helicopter crashes or mortar attacks killing soldiers—the faces and names of our dead flashing across a TV screen, in local papers, or on our computers and smartphones—everything morphing together to become the background noise of a lost decade of continual conflict. And now we’re constantly hearing about Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post Traumatic Stress (not a disorder), suicides, homelessness, and a Veteran’s Administration plagued by failures of past and present policies. But what we haven’t heard enough of are their stories—the honest expressions of those stark realities and the repercussions of this vast and unwieldy thing we call War. It’s time we did.

As a Veteran, an educator, and the son of a Vietnam Vet, I’ve worked to ensure that the stories of our servicemen and women find expression. I was compelled to heed Sebastian’s call, but I understood that this endeavor would require much more than simply providing a space for Veterans to speak. It would necessitate a concerted effort from all of us—writers and educators, along with community and government leaders to lay the groundwork for this to happen. It would require us to be proactive, to reach out and create an environment where Veterans feel free to engage in this all-to-necessary dialogue. For me, the solution was grounded in teaching the stories of Veterans in classrooms, high schools and colleges, and sharing them in community reading groups and libraries throughout the country—their stories, essays, poetry and reflections on their experiences.

I called for dedicating an entire month every year to this effort, and I’ve spent the past year working to make this into reality—writing, reading, performing and speaking on the subject as often as possible. We kicked off the project in Northfield, Minnesota at a charter school last fall, and the results were astounding. Next, I went on to collaborate with an amazing group of Vets at the Minnesota Humanities Center who got behind this effort, and

together, we drafted a bill to make this official. All the hard work paid off. Last week, the Minnesota Legislature passed a bill designating October as **Veterans' Voices Month**. Here's the result:

*"The month of October is designated as Veterans' Voices Month in recognition of the state's desire to honor, recognize, and celebrate the contributions of veterans. Schools, organizations, and communities in the state are encouraged to hold events and programs that honor veterans and educate students and citizens about the unique culture of the military by sharing and studying veterans' experiences through stories, essays, poetry, and art from the men and women who have served in the armed forces."*

For me, it seems all too appropriate that this initiative begins in Minnesota, a leader in the Humanities, and the home state of one of the greatest war writers of our generation, Tim O'Brien. As a young boy growing up in the shadow of the Vietnam, I felt all too keenly the reverberations of O'Brien's war on my father's generation. Through young eyes, I came to see many of those Veterans as distant shadows, men who wanted to be left alone, disappearing into woodsheds or off fishing and hunting away from people—strong, stone-hard men withdrawing from a society that sent them off to fight. They carried the weight of their war and struggles all alone, and like so many other Vets in our history, they bore the burden in silence. I was fascinated by these strong men, and like many kids of my generation, we were enamored with war and by the secrets concealed behind their distant eyes. Silence has a kind of allure, after all, and in the absence of their words, I imagined glorious adventures and exciting, heroic tales being withheld from me. I wanted to be a hero, too, to go off and fight, to break myself upon some distant shore and discover what these men had experienced. I had no idea that most of them wanted only to forget, often struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, working to suppress the images and memories of a distant jungle. I wish I'd been fortunate enough to hear what only they could tell me.

I've only been in Minnesota for three years, but Tim O'Brien's wonderful novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, has imprinted another image of the distant Veteran in my subconscious—that of a man slipping quietly into a canoe and heading out into a vast lake all alone. I see that person, like so many other Vets, adrift without any clear sense of direction, lost and engulfed in their own silence, misunderstood and uncertain where to turn. My hope is that this project will serve as a beacon to some, calling them home and providing a safe harbor for expression—that their words will light the way for future generations.

So now we begin. Over the next year, I'm going to reach out to emerging Veteran Writers and introduce them to you, men and women who are working hard to express the inexpressible, digging deep within to impart their stories in a variety of ways—words that must be heard. I'll find them for you, and along the way, I'll work to engage with other states to join with Minnesota and declare October as Veterans' Voices Month.

The more I've written and spoken about this project, the more I've come to realize how little that we, as a nation, understand about the repercussions of war on both the individual and society. It's as if these hard truths have been boxed up and buried along with dead, locked deep inside the hearts of Veterans, or woven into the fabric of some infinite war memorial and contained there to be viewed from a safe distance and then forgotten. For me, this project transcends the notion of ending silence and has become about our responsibility to the future, to those boys and girls who we will call on to fight in future wars—many yet, unborn. This project is about bearing the weight of history into the present, like some vast meteor composed of every Veteran's story, past and present, crashing into a great lake and breaking open. I imagine their words reverberating outward—rippling across the nation into schools and libraries, churches, town halls and on stages where we listen, together as one, and do not judge, but bear witness to what these men and women have to tell us. We need their stories to find us, to wash

over us, and to cleanse a nation of its ignorance and indifference. Sebastian was right. It's the only way to share the moral responsibility of war.

Until Next Time,

J.A. Moad II



#### About J. A. Moad II

J.A. Moad II is a former Air Force C-130 pilot with over 3000 flight hours and 100 combat sorties. He served as an English Professor at the United States Air Force Academy and as a fiction editor for the War, Literature & the Arts Journal (WLA). He writes online essays for WLA and is engaged in a program to make October Veterans' Voices Month across the country. His short stories, poetry and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including winning the 2014 Consequences Magazine Fiction Award. In addition to writing, he has performed on stage at the Library of Congress and The Guthrie Theater as part of the Telling Project - giving a voice to the Veteran experience. He currently resides in Northfield, MN where he flies for Delta Airlines and is editing on a novel about an American military in a not too-distant future.

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## 8 Responses to *Veterans' Voices Month*



**Jim Stewart** says:

May 26, 2014 at 2:35 pm

This is a fine effort and I am also eager to experience what will come from those voices that have been unheard from for so long.

[Reply](#)



**J. A. Moad II** says:

May 27, 2014 at 1:26 am

As am I...

[Reply](#)



**Elizabeth Winthrop** says:

May 26, 2014 at 3:12 pm

Dear James Moad, I was very moved by your blog post this morning and quote from it in my own post on visiting war memorials in England.

<http://elizabethwinthrop.com/2014/05/26/war-memorials/>

Best.

Elizabeth

[Reply](#)



**J. A. Moad II** says:

May 27, 2014 at 1:30 am