Veterans, War Correspondents Find Common Ground

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By: Jeremy Dobbins

Photo caption: NPR's Quil Lawrence speaking at Wright State University
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Today we begin Season 3 of Veterans Voices', stories about local military veterans produced by student veterans at Wright State University. Last year, NPR Veterans Correspondent Quil Lawrence visited Wright State to talk to students about his experiences as a war correspondent. He spoke to Marine Corps veteran, and Wright State student Jeremy Dobbins of Springfield about what they have in common.

Transcript:

Jeremy Dobbins (JD): What drew you into being a war correspondent to begin with?

Quil Lawrence (QL): I guess I was probably looking for the most intense human experiences to document. And 9/11 happened and for reporters of my generation, or who were in the game in 2001, this is was it. This was our chance to make a contribution and this was going to be the most intense reporting era of my life. Like you, I imagine part of joining the Marines was that your country's at war and this is going to define your generation, and are you going to be one of the guys who said, “Okay I'm going to go do that.”

JD: Yeah, it's one of those things like I'm 18 or 19, there's a war going on and they're rallying the banners type thing, that's what you do. For a lot of people, it's kind of a family ordeal - the military. My grandfather was in World War II, my great-great-grandfather was in World War, I have an uncle...

QL: The military's become something of a family tradition for almost this warrior cast in the US because of the way the military was kicked off of Ivy League campuses, and because there hasn't been a draft it does end up being this small portion of our society that goes and bears the burden and feel the pain, and has the experience to really know and talk about what went on over there. And that's really scary to me, that we're country that can have a 10-year war and really have it not touch so many people.

JD: The world's a lot more connected. At same time, you can be a lot more insulated, too. It's easy to do in our culture.

QL: Yeah, yeah, communities are very, very different.
JD: Yeah, with social media, like some of the veterans groups online, the new VFW hall being on the Internet is really pretty true. I'm a part of a few different veterans things on social media and I don't go to the VFW hall in person, but flip through smartphone and catch up on stuff, and it's really sad that a lot of times you get on there and it's always, you know, pictures of people who have been committing suicide recently, and things like that. At the same time the world around me is more connected, it's insulated at the same time. Even that kind of stuff I feel like is insulated, too. That community is only one really paying attention to it and feeling the burden of it.

QL: One of the things that motivates me with this beat is reporting on the true cost of war, in broken homes, bodies, and hearts. It really just goes on forever, the cost of war.

JD: The issues that older vets talk about, a lot of them are the exact same thing that I've gone through, or people I know have gone through. For example, trying to re-establish family connections, or the way they do things. Have you noticed anything like that, anything that transcends generations?

QL: Absolutely. I think he goes back to Achilles and the Trojan War. And the point is very clear - that war has always done this. It's always damage people in long and lasting ways. And I feel like I don't know if we're doomed to keep repeating history. And I'm not saying war is always wrong, I don't know that, but it does seem like war is often started without an appreciation of the cost.

JD: Have you encountered much resistance from interviewing veterans and what not, being part of the media?

QL: With veterans, I don't get that much pushback. I think it helps to have been over there to the same places. And also I find that vets really often do want to tell their stories and no one asked because people are too uncomfortable to ask. They don't know how to ask, they don't think it will be well received. I've often find myself sitting down and chatting with people, and they're telling me these incredible stories and they've never told anyone. They haven't told their dad, they haven't told their brother the story. It's often because no one asked them.

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